DOCUMENT RESUME

ED 070 080 CS 200 248

AUTHOR Silver, Roger H.
TITLE The Absurd in Wallace Stevens' Poetry: A Method of Explicating Modern Poetry.
PUB DATE Jul 72
NOTE 99p.; Ph.D. Dissertation, Walden University

EDRS PRICE MF-$0.65 HC-$3.29
DESCRIPTORS Ambiguity; *American Literature; *Existentialism; Literary Analysis; *Literary Criticism; *Poetry; Symbols (Literary); *Thematic Approach; Twentieth Century Literature

ABSTRACT

This study discusses the dualistic view of reality in Wallace Stevens' poetry. The author argues that reality for Stevens is divided between the physical world of objects and the spiritual world which is known through the imagination. External reality is illusive because man's perceptual senses are limited; man therefore has to depend on his imagination to interpret physical reality. Using an existentialist point of view, the author interprets Stevens' attempt to confront and find meaning in the absurdity of human existence. Rather than becoming cynical or even nihilistic, Stevens believes that illusion should be celebrated, not lamented, because it is a means of creating beauty. This optimism makes his achievement unique in the literature of the absurd. The author suggests that his study proposes to be instructive--both as a guide to interpreting Stevens' poetry and for the suggestions it may offer for further study of similar attitudes in other modern American poets. A bibliography is included. (Author/DI)

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# THE ABSURD IN WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY: A METHOD OF EXPLICATING MODERN POETRY

By

Roger H. Silver

B.A., University of Rochester, 1960

M.A., State University of New York at Binghamton, 1966

---

Eugene Paul Nassar, Ph.D., Advisor

Professor of English,

Utica College of Syracuse University

A Dissertation Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of

The Requirements for the Degree of

Doctor of Philosophy

Walden University

July, 1972

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## ABSTRACT

### THE ABSURD IN WALLACE STEVENS' POETRY:

### A METHOD OF EXPLICATING MODERN POETRY

Wallace Stevens' approach to reality is a dualistic one: Reality for him is divided between the physical world of objects and the spiritual world -- the imagination. Steven's first concern in pursuing the complexity of this idea is with demonstrating the illusiveness of external reality due to the limitations of man's perceptual senses and the necessity for depending on the imagination as a means of interpreting the chaos of physical reality:

> It is fatal in the moon and empty there.
> But here, allons. The enigmatical
> Beauty of each beautiful enigma
>
> Becomes amassed in a total double-thing.
> We do not know what is real and what is not.
> -- from "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven"

I propose to discuss Stevens' dualistic treatment of man's perception of experience from an existentialist point of view, which has not quite been done before. The poems of Stevens emphasize the delicate balance that must be maintained between imagination and reality, and they explore the absurdity of constantly having to change the subject in order to remain faithful to physical reality, which, to the perceiving mind, is incessantly changing. Stevens sees the evanescence of the

material world's forms, and he is reminded of man's limitations, especially his mortality. His response to this condition is to attempt an accommodation to reality, which is particularly satisfying to him because it is hard-won:

> . . . The way through the world
> Is more difficult to find than the way beyond it.
> -- from "Reply to Papini"

My analysis in Chapters One and Two points out that Stevens is constantly aware of the limits of man's knowledge: specifically man's inability to discover meaning and order in the physical world and his subsequent need to rely on the imaginative world. I will demonstrate how Stevens' poems reveal man's mind striving to discover accommodations as it responds to the experience we call corporeal reality. This search for the logic explaining a world we can never pin down with certainty places the speakers in the poems in the very modern dilemma of confronting the absurdity of human existence: the fear that life is meaningless.

It is at once obvious that such a preoccupation with the illusory quality of the physical world can easily lead to cynicism and even nihilism. Stevens, however, discovers that illusion is something to celebrate rather than to lament, because it is a means of creating beauty. This optimism makes his achievement unique in the literature of the absurd.

The sources of the beautiful for Stevens lead him to

"hedonism," as in "The Comedian as the Letter C" and "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (Chapter Three); to art for art's sake, as in "The Man with the Blue Guitar" and "Notes towards a Supreme Fiction" (Chapter Four); and to the deeply meditative moment, when comfort in the corporeal world becomes possible through the joyous discovery of the paradoxical notion that permanence is found in change, as in "Credences of Summer" and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (Chapter Five).

This study proposes to be instructive both as a guide to interpreting Stevens' poetry and for the suggestions it may offer for further study of similar attitudes in other modern American poets.

## PREFACE

In American poetry Wallace Stevens' large body of poems is rare for its sustained treatment of the philosophical dimensions of one basic theme. This exploration of the one idea which he threads through all of his art gives his poetry the kind of unity that is only to be found in such other American poets as Walt Whitman, Emily Dickinson, Ezra Pound, and T.S. Eliot. Stevens' theme is the inter-relationship of reality and imagination. In pursuing the complexity of this idea his first concern is with demonstrating the illusiveness of external reality, due to the limitations of man's perceptual senses, and the necessity for depending on the imagination as a means of interpreting this reality.

Aware of the delicate balance that must be maintained between imagination and reality, Stevens is uniquely optimistic about the absurdity of constantly having to change the subject in order to remain faithful to external reality, which, to the perceiving mind, is incessantly changing. Stevens' sees the evanescence of the material world's forms, and he is reminded of man's limitations, especially his mortality. His response to this condition is to attempt an accommodation to life, which is particularly satisfying to him because it is hard won:

> . . . The way through the world
> Is more difficult to find than the way beyond it.[1]

Stevens' awareness of the human condition is an existential awareness in its acceptance of the sobering fact "that man has no other future than his own," to use Camus' phrase.[2] Stevens' poems reveal man's mind striving to discover accommodations as it responds to the experience we call corporeal reality. This search for a logic explaining a world we can never pin down with certainty places the speakers in the poems in the very modern dilemma of confronting the absurdity of human existence: the fear that life is meaningless.

It is at once obvious that such a preoccupation with the illusory quality of the physical world can easily lead to cynicism and even nihilism concerning the reliability of knowledge. Stevens, however, discovers that illusion is something to celebrate rather than to lament, because it is a means of overcoming death and creating beauty. Stevens' poetry proves that illusion is just as much a thing to value in the mid-twentieth century as Transcendental Intuition was for the Romantic poets.

Wallace Stevens' poetry is typical of modern American poetry in its search for enduring human values and its concern for the role of the artist in the world. It is one of the most successful

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[1]Wallace Stevens, The Collected Poems of Wallace Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., 1954), p. 446. (Hereinafter referred to as CP).

[2]Roger Martin du Gard, The Thibaults, trans. by Stuart Gilbert, with an Introduction by Albert Camus, trans. by Philip Thody and Ellen Kennedy, Bantam Books (New York: Viking Press, 1968), p. vi.

achievements in twentieth century poetry. Therefore, this study proposes to be instructive both as a guide to interpreting Stevens' work and for the suggestions it may offer for further study of similar themes in other modern American poets.

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# CHAPTER I

## INTRODUCTION

Wallace Stevens' reasons for writing poetry are clearly grounded in a philosophical attitude. This is true even though, as he often said,[1] he did not subscribe to a philosophical system as such. What excited him was the poetry of an idea: "There are levels of thought or vision where everything is poetic and to give attention to what we find there, that is to say, to identify at least a few philosophical ideas that are inherently poetic and to comment on them . . . ."[2]

It is the thesis of this essay that Stevens' central philosophic idea is the paradoxical notion that reality is an illusion. He says this in many ways in many different poems, but his clearest expression of it is found in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (1949):

> It is fatal in the moon and empty there.
> But here, allons. The enigmatical
> Beauty of each beautiful enigma
>
> Becomes amassed in a total double-thing.
> We do not know what is real and what is not.
> CP, 472

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[1]See for example the letter of May 29, 1952 to Sister M. Bernetta Quinn and of December 28, 1954 to Robert Pack in Letters of Wallace Stevens, selected and ed. by Holly Stevens (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1966), pp. 752-53 and 863-64, respectively. (Hereinafter referred to as Letters).

[2]Wallace Stevens, Opus Posthumous, ed. with introduction by Samuel French Morse (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., 1957), p. 190. (Hereinafter referred to as OP).

The line, "It is fatal in the moon and empty there" means that the atmosphere of the moon is literally fatal to man. It seems strange at first that Stevens, the exponent of the imaginative world, should underline the moon's barrenness, especially when the moon is the traditional poetic symbol of the imagination. But three things are happening here: First, Stevens is exhorting us not to concern ourselves with the barren moon; then, he is extolling the quotidian world ("But here, allons."); and finally he is championing the earth for what are the very same reasons for traditionally praising the moon:

> . . . The enigmatical
> Beauty of each beautiful enigma
>
> Becomes amassed in a total double-thing.
> We do not know what is real and what is not.

The nineteenth century romantic poets were as much aware of the moon as mere reflector of the sun's rays as twentieth century poets; but whereas the former emphasized its radiance as a symbol of pure imagination, Stevens acknowledges the moon's dual quality of barrenness and radiance, and he instructs us to perceive this dualism in observing the physical world of earth. The moon is to be avoided not only for its physical sterility but because of its significance as a symbol for pure imagination. Pure imagination is fatal because it rejects the physical world of objects and the senses. Ultimately, then, Stevens is only condemning the traditional poetic view of the moon in favor of an awareness of the moon's actual doubleness: both sterile

landscape (from the most objective perspective) and luminous jewel (man's most typical, though most subjective, view when at evening he sees it reflecting the sun's rays). Thus, Stevens' emphasis on the contradictory appearance of the moon makes it an apt symbol for the imagination, which must always be balanced or in touch with the facts of physical reality.

Without any warning, then, which is typical of him, Stevens ironically has introduced the tension between imagination and reality, which, he insists, is present wherever we look in the universe of physical objects. In Stevens' poetry the corporeal world is a place where the imagination is present, not absent. We must never forget that in discussing Stevens' concept of "reality," the imagination is usually included in his definition. Unfortunately, sometimes when he refers to "reality" he means material reality. I will elaborate on this definition in a moment, but right now it should be made clear that because Stevens includes the imagination as part of what most people consider material reality (but call "reality"), it is crucial for clarity that we use the term material, physical, or corporeal reality, even though Stevens does not, whenever we are discussing the opposite of the imagined world. Whenever the single word "reality" is used in this study, it will include the imagination. The usual critical terminology of imagination versus reality is obviously too fuzzy, but, unhappily, Stevens employs this contrasting set of terms also, which makes his prose confusing. (For example, he says, "The real is

only the base. But it is the base" (OP, 160).

Stevens' preoccupation with seeing things as they really are, and his realization that this can only be achieved through the imagination (which never sees the same thing twice) is, of course, paradoxical: We can never determine what is imagined and what is not. This sense of ignorance concerning man's basis for perception is one of the absurdities defining the human condition as an existential one: Man looks out on a dichotomous world possibly containing both an ideal objective material reality (which, of course, he can only see by dint of his imperfect senses) and the material reality which is constantly changed by the pressures of the imagination. Because of the limitations of the senses, these two realities cannot be distinguished: yet, despite the absurdity of this dichotomy, man has always believed, and continues to believe, in the platonic world and the physical one, though he is ever aware that such thoughts about "reality" are always threatening to become meaningless for him.

Although such an awareness does not assume the desperate proportions of Sartre's and Camus' confrontations with cosmic absurdity -- where the entire universe seems to be meaningless -- nonetheless, this is such a fundamental metaphysical absurdity that it can lead easily to cynicism or more gloomy speculation on the untrustworthiness of human perception. It is my contention that Stevens responds to this absurd state of things with none of the depressing qualities of the French artists of the absurd. He is never

overwhelmed by man's finitude. He realizes that man can not transcend his finite senses. He even considers the double paradox that the very conception of the illusiveness of reality may itself be an illusion, but, again, if there is a static, objective world, he happily insists that it cannot be discovered by the senses, which perceive change everywhere.

Change seems to be a constant factor of material reality, and Stevens frames his poems within this assumption. Thus, he mirrors the world of objects by quickly changing metaphors. Stevens can compose a poem on anything and everything: pineapples, music, statues, blackbirds. To some people this would appear to be confusing, but to Stevens everything is part of the same subject, is interchangeable with everything else, because he sees everything as part of one grand subject: the law of process -- growth, death, flux. The rich panoply of language which Stevens delights to employ is not bombast: On close reading it takes form as a necessary, ultimately affirmative comment on life's flux.

This choice of material reality as subject and a language which can only be temporarily sufficient to describe subjectively the material world is present throughout Stevens' career. Because Stevens struggles for relevance in face of the absurd fact that each poem he writes can only "momentarily bring . . . peace to the mind,"[3] his

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[3]Frank Lentricchia, The Gaiety of Language (Berkeley: University of California Press, 1968), p. 147.

creations are existential: the reader must respond to them with the knowledge that once he reads them they will become obsolete -- obsolete not for their artistic merits but as subject matter, in order to remain consistent with the philosophical doctrine espoused. This creativity in the presence of death, of doubts about reality, and of irrelevance is a unique force in the literary history of the absurd. Stevens confronts the absurd by the energy of his style -- through "the gaiety of language," to use his phrase (CP, 322).

Stevens' profusion and variety of images reflect his joy and trust in the senses, and his existentialism would be just that simple were it not for the fact that he is living, as are all of us, in more than a purely physical world. Coincident with the body's response to the material world is the mind's meditations generated by it. While the common basis for the senses and the imagined world is physical reality, it is the imagined world which transcends physical space and sensation. Stevens' discussion of man's knowledge of physical things makes clear just how necessarily central and natural the imagined world is in man's perception of the material world:

> According to the traditional views of sensory perception, we do not see the world immediately but only as the result of a process of seeing and after the completion of that process, that is to say, we never see the world except the moment after. Thus we are constantly observing the past. Here is an idea, not the result of poetic thinking and entirely without poetic intention, which instantly changes the face of the world. Its effect is that of an almost inappreciable change of which, nevertheless, we remain acutely conscious. The material world, for

> all the assurances of the eye, has become immaterial. It has become an image in the mind. The solid earth disappears and the whole atmosphere is subtilized not by the arrival of some venerable beam of light from an almost hypothetical star but by a breach of reality. What we see is not an external world but an image of it and hence an internal world (OP, 190-191).

Consequently, what is "out there" in the supposedly objective, physical world is dominated by the imagination: "The imagination is man's power over nature" (OP, 179). Yet, although man thinks that the life of the physical world is only mediately experienced, and therefore not necessarily finally true, his nervous system is such that he is frightened by apparent pressures of physical reality, particularly what to the mortal mind appears to be change and, more particularly, death. These pressures incessantly challenge and intimidate the vitality of his internal world of imagination. How can the imagination have the strength to prevail? Stevens wrestles with this dilemma, and it is in his struggle to maintain imaginings of reality, in his effort to justify any idealizations of human existence, that he shapes a powerful affirmative poetry existential at its core.

The foregoing synopsis of the philosophic tensions in Stevens' poetry brings us to the task of their exposition in the poems themselves, which is the subject of this paper.

There are four distinct aspects to Stevens' approach to the absurd, one stressed more than the others in separate poems. First, there are the poems celebrating the sensual life: "hedonistic" poems, such as "Sunday Morning" (see my analysis below, pp. 20-22)

and "Homunculus et la Belle Etoile" (pp. 22-24).

The second group of poems pursues the consequences of hedonism more seriously, both in terms of a particular man's biography, "The Comedian as the Letter C" (pp. 24-36), and in an academic and historical context, "Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" (pp. 39-44).

The many poems celebrating art for its own sake represent the third approach to the absurd. The best of these poems are "To the One of Fictive Music" (pp. 51-52) and "The Idea of Order at Key West" (pp. 52-56), which closely explore the paradoxical nature of the relationship between reality and the imagination: "The Man with the Blue Guitar" (pp. 56-57), which invokes the poetic imagination as the new God; and "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" (pp. 59-63) which proclaims the necessity for maintaining faith in poetry despite doubts caused by the pressures of external reality. As Stevens confronts the harshness of reality and searches for a modus vivendi with the absurd, how does he justify his preoccupation with art rather than reality as subject? The absurdity of writing poems about poetry can be motivated by differing reasons. It can be a means of escape from the physical, as it was for the Romantics, or it can be a tribute to it, as it was for Stevens, with the poetic act becoming the metaphor for the minimal but essential harmony that can be achieved with nature. Stevens never tired of this subject.

The longer, meditative poems on art as subject can actually

be considered as the fourth aspect in Stevens' poetry of the absurd: Poems such as "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cementry" (pp. 70-72) and "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" (pp. 81-84, 87) moves to the aesthetic moment of blissful, pure abstract thought, as solace in the physical becomes more and more difficult and unsure.

We know from the previous literature of the absurd that its earmark is uncertainty about the extent of one's knowledge about the corporeal world. This doubt continually dominates the persona's, if not the artist's mind in such works. While Stevens' poems contain none of the intense, schizophrenic contradictoriness which we find in Dostoevsky's or Camus' antiheroes, the fact that he finds logically opposite, paradoxical views simultaneously congenial gives his achievement another commonness with absurdist thought.

A final comment on Stevens' quartet of themes. Since most of the poetry was composed after 1930, when he was over fifty years old, it is not so surprising to find that all four of these approaches to the absurd are contemporaneous in Stevens' work. It is to the poems that we now turn.

## CHAPTER II

## MATERIAL REALITY VERSUS IMAGINATION AS EXISTENTIAL SUBJECT

There are three premises basic to Wallace Stevens' existential treatment of material reality. The first is that man's perception of the world of objects is clouded with perpetual doubt because of the imperfection of his senses. This is the only confusing postulate of the three; it contains a conundrum so circular that everything which follows can be seen to contradict the initial premise: If the senses are imperfect, how can the mind, which perceives through the senses, assume that there is a static world of objects apart from the senses' perception of them? Indeed, how can it even know that the senses are imperfect at all?

Both questions are answered by the second premise: Change inheres in everything which the imperfect senses perceive. This change causes us to doubt our senses and to assume on faith that there must be an objective world of material things.

Stevens assumes that imperfect rather than perfect forms or objects exist in the world, even when no one is looking at them, and he rejects Plato's concept of pure forms. Objects for Stevens are always in a state of chaos; they are only ordered when perceived by the shaping power of the imagination. This is the third premise in Stevens' view

of material reality.

The first and third premises are demonstrated very simply in the early poem "Earthy Anecdote." The physical world of nature is represented by the bucks, who, as far as the narrator of the poem can observe, must be in a state of chaos, since he says, "the bucks went clattering" (CP, 3). The firecat is associated with the imagination because of the ethereal and evanescent qualities suggested by its name. An order is created when the physical world contacts the imaginative world:

> . . . they swerved
> In a swift, circular line
> To the right,
> Because of the firecat.
> (italics mine)

Note that objective reality assumes certain form for only a "swift," existential second, but the brevity of the moment is not cause for despair; a moment similar to this will happen again, since the poem closes with the image of the firecat temporarily asleep.

Here we see how the interrelation of material reality and imagination is revealed: The world of objects is made comprehensible only through the ordering imagination, which can have true life only when it relates to material objects, e.g., the relation that the "firecat" elicits from the "bucks" and vice versa:

> The bucks clattered.
> The firecat went leaping,
> To the right, to the left,
> And
> Bristled in the way.

It is appropriate for the firecat to sleep and the bucks to continue their chaotic clatter, because the imagination, or, more generally, the human mind is mortal, while the material universe endures in its unperceived state. However, the poet prefers to remember the benign image of the firecat, not the furious scene of the bucks. Even though the two are necessary to each other, the imagination is a refuge from the disorder of physical reality. We are left with the serene sense that with the awakening of the firecat and the subsequent control it will exercise over the bucks all manner of things will be clear again, though not permanently so.

"Earthy Anecdote" and other poems such as "Anecdote of the Jar" and "Tea at the Palaz of Hoon" are typical of Stevens' optimistic statements on the power of the imagination in supplying " a cherished . . . order to chaos. . . ."[1] But Stevens also has moments of anxiety in confronting material reality, and, ironically enough, these can occur at times that, at least apparently, are hardly threatening or baffling. "Metaphors of a Magnifico" addresses itself to the possibility of delving beneath the obvious. The speaker in the poem is observing "Twenty men crossing a bridge" (CP, 19) and trying very hard to understand what that action means beneath its outward appearance:

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[1] Eugene Paul Nassar. Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration. (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965), p. 15.

Twenty men crossing a bridge,
Into a village,
Are twenty men crossing twenty bridges,
Into twenty villages,
Or one man
Crossing a single bridge into a village.

It is perhaps an intriguing but certainly a very simple example of quotidian reality. The observer is initially frustrated with the scene, which sparks a philosophic quandary in him. Do these twenty men represent something other than what they are? Are they to be considered individually, collectively, or universally? Their activity causes the observer to ponder the ontological questions behind the superficial, material world, but he decides that he is unable to think beyond what he hears and sees, and he settles for the beauty of the place rather than a solution to the ontological paradox:

That will not declare itself
Yet is certain as meaning . . .

The boots of the men clump
On the boards of the bridge,
The first white wall of the village
Rises through fruit trees.
Of what was it I was thinking?
So the meaning escapes.

The basic idea of the imagination's shaping power in "Earthy Anecdote" has now been complicated to the extent that there is a recognition that the mind can never permanently fix the unknown world that may exist beyond the senses. "Metaphors of a Magnifico" ends with a description of the mind failing to resolve the ontological paradox and settling for the subjective joy to be experienced from observing an

objective landscape. But the speaker there does not reveal whether or not he is resigned to this impotence. However, in "The Emperor of Ice-Cream," a poem which Stevens considered among his "pleasantest,"[2] we find a conclusively positive statement about the difficulties of metaphysical speculation:

> Let be be finale of seem.
> The only emperor is the emperor of ice-cream.
> CP, 64

The ice-cream vendor, in his dispensing of sweets, is no less an emperor in the eyes of children than the existential poet may be to the adult world. Therefore, accept, as objectively real, that which appears to be objectively real; e.g., do not seek beyond the image of the twenty men crossing a bridge.

Just as Stevens accommodates himself in "Metaphors" to the absurdity of not being able to probe into what may be a further reality, so in "On the Adequacy of Landscape" he acknowledges that poets and non-poets must stay in harmony with life by actively responding to constantly shifting reality, endless as the cycle is. Stevens distinguishes between true poets, in the general sense of that word, and idle dreamers. The latter live with the constant fear of "personal death"[3] (symbolized by the owl). Since they consider the imagination as threatening if it is not transcendental, it is associated with the intimidating owl. The only

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[2]See the letter of January 24, 1933 to William Rose Benét in Letters, 264.

[3]Nassar, An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 49, n. 17.

way that these dreamers could be happily reconciled to the imagination is if they accepted the reality of nature (symbolized by the red bird, "red being the color of unabstracted reality in all its harshness").[4]

> The people that turned off and came
> To avoid the bright discursive wings,
> To avoid the hap-hallow hallow-ho
> Of central things,
>
> Nor in their empty hearts to feel
> The blood-red redness of the sun . . .
> CP, 243

Acceptance of material reality would feed their imaginations, but they are unwilling to pay the price that acceptance of the mortal world of nature brings. True poets recognize that an adequate landscape must be grounded in the life-and-death cycle of nature, and its consequent anguish, in order to summon the proper imagination:

> So that he that suffers most desires
> The red bird most and the strongest sky --
> Not the people in the air that hear
> The little owl fly.
> CP, 244

Stevens' observation of the strange interdependence of the imagination and the world of objects is paradoxically clarified as he strives for a clear, pure vision of this world of nature. The struggle yields some of his most ardent poetry, as in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction":

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[4]Ibid., p. 38.

How clean the sun when seen in its idea,
Washed in the remotest cleanliness of a heaven
That has expelled us and our images . . .
CP, 381

Yet the fascination with pristine nature can not help but reflect the imagination's potency: As the curious mind incessantly seeks to understand, penetrate, and reconstruct the reality of the physical, it learns how the one is part of the other. Stevens frames this paradox, implicit in "Notes," quite bluntly in the late poem, "The Plain Sense of Things":

Yet the absence of the imagination had
Itself to be imagined.
CP, 503

Then, in "The Motive for Metaphor", when the poet reverses the equation and contemplates the imagination, he discovers that he has arrived unwittingly at a clearer knowledge of the physical reality he is shunning. The motive for metaphor is escape from earthly change and death, "the trees in autumn" where "everything is half dead" (CP, 288), to the "exhilarations of changes" by the transforming imagination. Yet when Stevens focuses only on the glare and harshness of fatal reality, he thereby suggests that one can not escape what we call "the same dull world." There is a creative flight in the poem, but it is achieved in the description of the avoidance of the physical world, which, willy-nilly, the poet observes, i.e., imagines, as dynamic and desirable:

The motive for metaphor, shrinking from
The weight of primary noon,
The A B C of being,

The ruddy temper, the hammer
Of red and blue, the hard sound --
Steel against intimation -- the sharp flash,
The vital, arrogant, fatal, dominant X.
CP, 288

Man, then, is bound to the world of physical objects, and it is absurd for him to think he can transcend that world. Poems such as "The Motive for Metaphor" reveal Stevens not maddened by this finitude (symbolized by "X") but celebrating it, though, of course, with strong doses of self-irony. For Stevens the important thing is how the imagination responds to the object. The inexhaustible possibilities of response allow for the temporary illusions of transcendence: The idea of an object and the act of perceiving it become one. This fusion is an act of quasi-transcendence, similar to Yeats's adjustment in "Among School Children" to the indistinguishability of the dancer and the Platonic dance. And Stevens even more clearly repeats this position, in his typically qualified, conditional fashion, in "Desire & the Object," written near the time of "The Motive for Metaphor":

Or was it Jaffa that created desire?
The origin could have its origin.
It could be, could be.

It could be that the sun shines
Because I desire it to shine or else
That I desire it to shine because it shines.
OP, 85

This twofold quality comprising the complete reality is

beautifully spelled out in prose by Frank Doggett:

> The apparent duality of mind and world that permeates his poetry may seem, in a superficial view, to be at variance with a naturalistic conception of things; but mind in Stevens, as in Schopenhauer or Santayana, is only nature looking at itself. If the world we know exists as it is only in a particular experience of it, if the world that we know is a conceived world, the one who conceives is only a part of that world. His nature is her nature; or, to state the figure in an abstraction, the subject is part of the object. [5]

We can conclude that Stevens considers the notion of the possibility of our knowing an objective reality to be absurd: the mind clings to the idea of it, but remains enthralled by the senses inevitably interpreting it. A pure romantic might stake everything with the imagination, but Stevens remains faithful to invisible objective reality. It supplies the existential tension to his epistemology.

A late poem, "As You Leave the Room," moves toward the same inevitable paradox. The speaker questions whether he has been "a disbeliever in reality" (physical reality) and what enables him to answer "no" is the snow. Snow, symbol of colorlessness and perishability, but also indubitably vivid to the senses, is Stevens' ironic vehicle for smiling at the imagination's reliance on the physical, while still maintaining his faith in the physical, despite man's tenuous knowledge of it and ambiguous feelings toward it. Snow affords

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[5] "Our Number is Her Nature," The Twenties: Poetry and Prose, 20 Critical Essays, ed. by Richard E. Langford and William E. Taylor (Deland, Fla.: Edward Everett Press, 1966), p. 41.

An appreciation of a reality

And thus an elevation, as if I left
With something I could touch, touch every way.

And yet nothing has been changed except what is
Unreal, as if nothing had been changed at all.
OP, 117

The only thing that has been changed is the appreciation of a material object via the imagination. But the point is that one's appreciation (or imagination) of material reality is all that one has, even if this appreciation is "Unreal" in the sense of being invisible to the eye, though not to the heart. But this invisibility causes Stevens' ambivalent attitude toward the imagination:

Unreal, give back to us what once you gave:
The imagination that we spurned and crave.
CP, 88

Thus, despite Stevens' faith in the imagination in shaping material reality, he is also aware of its frail power: The thought of the subsequent harshness of material reality in those times when the imagination is dulled and the mind is depressed gnaws at him. This explains why he only allows the imagination a thin triumph, and concludes this poem and many others in a typically difficult syntax of understatement and subjunctiveness. Yet even though Stevens' doubt is expressed, the mood of "As You Leave the Room" is of the rarefied, spiritual quiet that comes with old age. It stands as one of Stevens' last statements on the relation of imagination and corporeal reality.

## CHAPTER III

## TOWARDS A RELIGIOUS HEDONISM

"Sunday Morning" is the natural beginning for any discussion of Stevens' hedonistic view. It is an argument for the pleasures of the flesh over the transcendental spirit:

> Shall she not find in comforts of the sun,
> In pungent fruit and bright, green wings,
> or else
> In any balm or beauty of the earth,
> Things to be cherished like the thought of
> heaven?
> CP, 67

Since the order of nature is based on the impermanence of living things, the Christian concept of heavenly perfection is considered implausible:

> Is there no change of death in paradise?
> Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the
> boughs
> Hang always heavy in that perfect sky, . . .
> CP, 69

All life must wither and die. That process is the price that is paid for beauty; the fact of death makes beauty more precious. As Stevens says, "Death is the mother of beauty" (CP, 68).

> Supple and turbulent, a ring of men
> Shall chant in orgy on a summer morn
> Their boisterous devotion to the sun,
> . . . . . .
> They shall know well the heavenly fellowship
> Of men that perish and of summer morn.
> CP, 69-70

The last image in the poem epitomizes Stevens' attitude toward death. Once sublime beauty is reached, only death can follow: But we remember the pigeons' graceful descent rather than their extinction:

> At evening, casual flocks of pigeons make
> Ambiguous undulations as they sink,
> Downward to darkness, on extended wings.
> CP, 70

Stevens' rejection in "Sunday Morning" of spiritual transcendence as offered through the metaphysics of Christianity is final, but his espousal of hedonism in that same poem becomes more refined and less obvious in the succeeding years. This is due not to a dissatisfaction with the subject of sensual delight as the summum bonum, since it is a basic concern with him, but to the subjectivism that comes with age ("When one is young everything is physical; when one is old everything is psychic." OP, 167) and to the demand for a constant change of subject required by a poetry which absurdly celebrates mortality and process as "the mother of beauty."[1]

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[1]The argument of "Sunday Morning" appeals more to the heart's logic than the mind's. Eugene Nassar observed that the tragic tone of the poem is falsified by stanzas II, III, and VIII (which were omitted in the first printed version of the poem): "To romanticize a vision of duality of the human condition to the point of considering the evil of the human condition as a divine part of the loveliness of the whole seems to me, philosophically, simply a cutting of the Gordian knot. . . ." The Rape of Cinderella (Bloomington: University of Indiana Press, 1970), p. 55. His criticism is quite right. The notion that eternal bliss would be a bore ("Does ripe fruit never fall? Or do the boughs/Hang always heavy in that perfect sky, . . .") assumes that the human mind is unable to conceive of a heaven which would be constantly entertaining and various.

The question of "paradise" in "Sunday Morning" seems to me to be primarily rhetorical, because the woman is mostly concerned with modern life as it must be lived, not as one would wish it to be lived in heaven. Therefore, her meditation, like so many of Stevens' poems, constantly struggles to accept the necessity for deaths' involvement with beauty. This preoccupation with change is the imagination's way of responding to the reality of death.

Stevens adheres to the idea in "Sunday Morning" that change is beneficent in life. That poem's creed is validated each time he writes a poem: His basic subject remains the same; but in order to maintain the newness of poetry, newness being one of his requirements for beauty, his poems must appear to change. He says: "A change in style is a change of subject" (OP, 71). (Of course, the fact that his masterpieces are enjoyable, often more enjoyable, on rereading is a practical and ironic contradiction of his theory of beauty, which states that each composition will become obsolete upon completion).

As we have seen, "Sunday Morning" presents a simple philosophy which belies the apparently recondite titles, the difficult syntax, and esoteric word combinations complete with "boom, whistles, quavers,"[2] which accompany its expression in many other Stevens poems. "Homunculus et la Belle Etoile" is a good example of this, and

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[2]Paul Rosenfield, "Wallace Stevens," in The Achievement of of Wallace Stevens, ed. by Ashley Brown and Robert S. Haller (Philadelphia: J.B. Lippincott, Co., 1962), p. 35.

it also carries the hedonistic doctrine one step further by suggesting that it is the solution for other, more complicated, philosophies. The dazzling beauty of the "young emerald, evening star" is a "Good light" for such romantics as "drunkards, poets, widows,/And ladies soon to be married" (CP, 25).

The philosophers, however, think otherwise. They confidently

> . . . bathe their hearts in later moonlight,
>
> Knowing that they can bring back thought
> In the night that is still to be silent,
> Reflecting this thing and that . . .
> CP, 26

Stevens punctures their self-satisfaction: He warns that

> They should think hard in the dark cuffs
> Of voluminous cloaks,
> And shave their heads and bodies.

If these intellects exposed themselves to the natural world, they would be shocked to discover that "The innermost good of their seeking/ Might come in the simplest of speech." Worse than that:

> It might well be that their mistress
> Is no gaunt fugitive phantom.
> She might, after all, be a wanton,
> Abundantly beautiful, eager . . .

The influence of the physical world, then, is so strong that even the most disciplined minds must avoid it or else succumb to its sensual power and its negation of their philosophies.

The concluding stanza of 'Homunculus" states the consequences

of being enraptured by the emerald star:

> It is a good light then, for those
> That know the ultimate Plato,
> Tranquillizing with this jewel
> The torments of confusion.
> CP, 27

In other words, the emotional response induced by sensual beauty satisfactorily, though only momentarily, clarifies the puzzles confronted by the probing mind.[3] These brief moments bring an aesthetic quietude.

But to an intelligent, serious person what are the possibilities of pursuing a hedonistic life? This is the unanswered question posed by "Homunculus et la Belle Etoile." Stevens proceeds to answer it in the immediately succeeding piece in the Collected Poems, "The Comedian as the Letter C." This is one of his longest works and perhaps his happiest one, but Stevens' incredibly mannered language camouflages the profundity of his inquiry. Stevens' dramatization of dandyism and tone of sarcasm is a reflection of his reevaluation of the question of hedonism since "Sunday Morning." The woman in the latter poem is bathing in the sun, so we can not consider that her lucid argument is divorced from the irrational influence of the sensual world. Nonetheless,

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[3]R. P. Blackmur, in a completely different context in "Wallace Stevens: An Abstraction Blooded," Language as Gesture (New York: Harcourt, Brace & Company, 1952), p. 250, quotes the lines as "the ultimate Plato, the tranquil jewel in this confusion." Blackmur probably meant this as a gloss of the line, but even so, it is an interpretation contradicted by everything preceding it in the poem. The "jewel" is not Plato; it is the "emerald, evening star."

"Sunday Morning" is as clear and sober a meditation on the choice of hedonism that Stevens ever gives us. But with "The Comedian as the Letter C" we are in a mode of thought in which a rational quest is accompanied not by the traditional sobriety of tone but by hilarity. This comic pose indicates that the speaker has had a glimpse of the absurd before beginning his meditation, and although he has not lost what at least he thinks are ratiocinative powers, he realizes that, given the supervening absurdity of what is only the apparently ordered cosmos, these powers do not matter very much.

Stated in the baldest terms, "The Comedian as the Letter C" traces the course of a man's adjustment to reality and his attempt to come to terms with the sense of his own absurdity. While it is true that most of the exegetes agree on this, [4] they have not realized the existential dimensions of Crispin's journey.

"The Comedian as the Letter C" is more than a parody of Stevens' earliest style and a farewell to that style; the purgation of the dandy's pose through the most outlandishly foppish and bizarre vocabu-

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[4]See e.g., Frank Doggett, Stevens' Poetry of Thought (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1966); Daniel Fuchs, The Comic Spirit of Wallace Stevens (Durham, N.C.: Duke University Press, 1963); Eugene Paul Nassar, Wallace Stevens: An Anatomy of Figuration (Philadelphia: University of Pennsylvania Press, 1965); William Van O'Connor, The Shaping Spirit: A Study of Wallace Stevens (Chicago: Henry Regnery Company, 1950); Robert Pack, Wallace Stevens: An Approach to His Poetry and Thought (New Brunswick: Rutgers University Press, 1958); Joseph N. Riddell, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965).

lary he ever used is only a minor theme in the poem. As Blackmur says, "what he deals with is not comic."[5]

The first line of the poem is enigmatic: "Nota, man is the intelligence of his soil, / The sovereign ghost."[6] In the most general interpretation we can say that this simply means that man is the perceiver of his world. This is a pointless statement until we decide whether the perceiver is using his imagination (i.e., is subjective) or is objective, or whether anything but the former is really possible anyway. Since part I, which is entitled "The World without Imagination," concludes with the narrator announcing, "The last distortion of romance / Forsook the insatiable egotist" (CP, 30), we can reread this first formula as the narrator's summary indication that Crispin's early poetic response to reality is a solipsistic one. The phrase "sovereign ghost" suggests this: Crispin is the ruling phantom of romantic poetry because he feels he is the measure of all things. When part I opens, Crispin is aware of his problem and is proceeding to rid himself of the deceptive imagination, which leaves him the confused prisoner of a confusing world:

> . . . the eye of Crispin, hung
> On porpoises, instead of apricots,
> And on silentious porpoises, whose snouts
> Dibbled in waves that were mustachios,
> Inscrutable hair in a inscrutable world.
> CP, 27

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[5] R. P. Blackmur, "Examples of Wallace Stevens," in Form and Value in Modern Poetry, Anchor Books (Garden City, N. Y.: Doubleday & Co. Inc., 1957), p. 212.

[6] "For intelligence we read the imagination as the sovereign place of perception." James Baird, The Dome and the Rock (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins Press, 1968,) p. 231.

The absurdly pretentious language of the poem is not Crispin's, but it is a metaphor for the kind of poetry the egotistical Crispin used to write:

> What counted was mythology of self,
> Blotched out beyond unblotching. Crispin,
> The lutanist of fleas, the knave, the thane,
> The ribboned stick, the bellowing breeches, cloak
> Of China, cap of Spain, imperative haw of hum . . .
> CP, 28

Throughout Crispin's odyssey, however, the weird language continues, representing stages of Crispin's awareness of his existential position. Thus, there is a parallel between the reader's probing of Crispin's vocabulary and Crispin's search for objective reality. The persisting cloudiness of the narrator's diction is the poet's exaggerated way of suggesting man's absurd relation to his cognitive powers: He dreams of objective reality, but he is afraid that what he sees and experiences is what he, and he alone, sees and experiences. The poem represents a final acceptance of this absurd condition.

Crispin's intense experience of the sea, which he mistakes for the sea itself, leads him toward a journey that will at one phase bring him to a temporary renunciation of poetry, as it did for Stevens before him. Poetry is rejected because it is too indirect a means for experiencing one's sensual reponse to material reality. The narrator's description of Crispin's initiation into sensuality presents the comedian overwhelmed by his senses:

> Crispin was washed away by magnitude.
> The whole of life that still remained in him

Dwindled to one sound strumming in his ear,
Ubiquitous concussion, slap and sigh,
Polyphony beyond his baton's thrust.
CP, 28

Anxious for more experiences, Crispin voyages to the brutal, vibrant reality of Yucatan. What does he learn?

Crispin foresaw a curious promenade
Or, nobler, sensed an elemental fate,
And elemental potencies and pangs,
And beautiful barenesses as yet unseen,
Making the most of savagery of palms . . .
CP, 31

For someone who merely used to watch "The stride of vanishing autumn in a park" or, like T.S. Eliot's ineffectual lover Sweeney, "wrote his couplet yearly to the spring, / As dissertation of profound delight," this seems like progress. Crispin is elated. Yucatan has prepared him for "America":

He felt the Andean breath. His mind was free
And more than free, elate, intent, profound
And studious of a self possessing him, . . .
CP, 33

But just previously the narrator has warned us that Crispin's Mexican experience is irrelevant to a solution of his metaphysical problem: How to avoid solipsism? Crispin has made a decision not to write poetry, but the narrator's facetious praise of him tells us that Crispin has only avoided his problem; he has not solved it:

How greatly had he grown in his demesne,
This auditor of insects! . . .
CP, 31

So Crispin journeys back to America, to Carolina, symbolic of the ordinary. He has concluded that the only poetry worth composing is of the quotidian world, and he has also decided that it will be sufficient for him merely to observe and understand this everyday universe:

> . . . Tilting up his nose,
> He inhaled the rancid rosin, burly smells
> Of dampened lumber, emanations blown
> From warehouse doors, the gustiness of ropes,
> Decays of sacks, and all the arrant stinks
> That helped him round his rude aesthetic out.
> He savored rankness like a sensualist.
> He marked the marshy ground around the dock,
> The crawling railroad spur, the rotten fence,
> Curriculum for the marvelous sophomore.
> It purified. It made him see how much
> Of what he saw he never saw at all.
> He gripped more closely the essential prose
> As being, in a world so falsified,
> The one integrity for him, the one
> Discovery still possible to make,
> To which all poems were incident, unless
> That prose should wear a poem's guise at last.
> CP, 36

Section IV opens then with Crispin's announcement of a revision of his original proposition. It now reads, "Nota: his soil is man's intelligence." The hero is quite proud: "That's better. That's worth crossing seas to find." He believes that he has moved from the blindness of his subjectivism to the knowledge that the objectively real is the one integrity. Is Crispin's revision just another "grand pronunciamento" (CP, 43)? At first it would seem so because it is only superficially opposite to the original proposition; that is, the revision still does not come to terms with the fact that the imagination's ordering of reality depends upon its perception of the world through

the five senses. How can one be sure that one is avoiding solipsism? The answer is that there is no way of proving this philosophically. We believe that it is proven each time we communicate our ideas with other people, but we can never know if our senses betray us.

Crispin believes that at least he can compromise with the imagination by only writing poems which reflect stark objective reality despite his knowledge of the empirical absurdity of attempting to perceive objectively. He will strive to keep his imagination completely rooted to reality in an attempt to avoid solipsism:

> For application Crispin strove,
> Abhorring Turk as Esquimau, the lute
> As the marimba, the magnolia as rose.
> CP, 38

Crispin's exemplification of his revised second theorum is the line, "The natives of the rain are rainy men" (CP, 37). This surely seems more suitable as an illustration of the first proposition, "man is the intelligence of his soil." However, Crispin is quite sure of what he is saying. He knows that poets must constantly struggle for objectivity, and he also realizes that the only way they can try to achieve it is to reflect the reality of their environment ("soil"), even at the risk of solipsism.

Therefore, Crispin has reached a significant mid-position in part IV of his odyssey. He has learned that he can not avoid an imaginative response to the world because, as Nassar says, it "is instinctive and is as much a part of our being as our rational response. . . .

All objects change and fluctuate ('carouse') in our imaginative perception of them. The realization (that perception is not absolute) is a humbling one, but it makes one feel more attachment to, less disdain for, the purple yarrow in the mind."[7] (The 'yarrow " represents the mass of impressions which impinge on the imagining mind and is subsequently ordered by it).

The next question that arises then, is this: Why doesn't Crispin continue as a poet? Now that he has pursued the riddle of solipsism as far as is philosophically possible, he can take up his pen again without trepidation. As long as he keeps his eyes on material reality, his imagination will not betray him. However, Crispin's trip to the jungles of Mexico seems to have made a "realist" of him in this mid-position of his journey, i.e., Crispin has lost interest in his imaginative powers. He prefers to content himself with experiencing real pleasures of the sensual world rather than to shape them into poetic art, whose practical function he degrades:

> He could not be content with counterfeit,
> With masquerade of thought, with hapless words
> That must belie the racking masquerade,
> With fictive flourishes that preordained
> His passion's permit, hang of coat, degree
> Of buttons, measure of his salt. Such trash
> Might help the blind, not him, serenely sly.
> It irked beyond his patience. Hence it was,
> Preferring text to gloss, he humbly served
> Grotesque apprenticeship to chance event,
> A clown perhaps, but an aspiring clown.
> CP, 39

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[7]Nassar, An Anatomy of Figuration, pp. 164, 167.

The above quotation contains much self-irony. It suggests Stevens' tense doubts (the tension which makes his poetry so relevant to hur rum affairs, thus revivifying them) concerning the validity of poetry in the practical world, e.g., the line "Such trash/ Might help the blind, not him, serenely sly." Meanwhile, "A clown, perhaps, but an aspiring clown" casts doubt on Crispin's choice of practicality over poetry. "The Comedian . . ." to this point is the mirror in which is reflected the half-way house in Stevens' spiritual biography. We will see that Crispin, like Stevens before and after him, will learn the necessity for returning to poetry again and again. Stevens obviously often thought about devoting himself entirely to business or to poetry.[8] (Luckily, he was talented and disciplined enough to be able to accomplish both). The poem displays the kind of circular irony of which Stevens is so fond: Stevens the narrator mocks Crispin, but he is also mocking Stevens the poet at the mid-stage of his spiritual development.[9]

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[8]See particularly the letter of November 15, 1935 to Ronald Lane Latimer, in which Stevens blames Crispin's problem on his failure to create order from "a mass of irrelevancies," and the letter of November 29, 1954 to Archibald MacLeish, in which he rejects an offer to become Charles Eliot Norton professor at Harvard for 1955-56, in Letters, 293-294 and 852-853, respectively.

[9]We can assume that Crispin's position here reflects Stevens' own biography. Stevens' main concern was for business, and, although poetry was necessary to him, he did not let it interfere with his business career. Thus, Stevens, who was forty-three years old in 1922. when he wrote "The Comedian . . ." (for date see Letters, 224, n2; 229, n. 2), was not to publish Harmonium, his first volume of poetry, until 1923. Samuel French Morse, in his biography of Stevens, points out that the birth of Stevens' first child in 1925 and Stevens' increasing importance to the Hartford Accident and Indemnity Company (in which he became

The last two parts of "The Comedian . . ." describe Crispin's progression from being the exponent of the physical world and the denier of poetry's place in that world to the humble, optimistic philosopher who combines the possibilities of poetry with ordinary middle-class life. The latter is suggested by the sustained metaphor of family life, first introduced by the titles "A Nice Shady Home" and "And Daughters with Curls."

"A Nice Shady Home" opens with the statement that Crispin's "discontent" with reality's limits has not made him "the prickling realist" (CP, 40) who "Scrawls a tragedian's testament . . . " (CP, 41). This is not surprising, since throughout the first three parts of the poem the narrator's outlandishly rhapsodic rhetoric has suggested Crispin's comic stance. Crispin treasures physical reality despite its finitude, and he considers the traditional view that great art is eternal from a perspective which minimizes that view:

> The words of things entangle and confuse.
> The plum survives its poems. It may hang
> In the sunshine placidly, colored by ground
> Obliquities of those who pass beneath,
> Harlequined and mazily dewed and mauved
> In bloom. Yet it survives in its own form,
> Beyond these changes, good, fat, guzzly fruit.
> So Crispin hasped on the surviving form,
> For him, or shall or ought to be in is.
> CP, 41

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vice-president in 1934) correspond to his lean poetic years between 1924 and 1929-30 when he wrote probably no more than one poem. Wallace Stevens: Poetry as Life (New York: Pegasus, 1970), pp. 140-141, 146.

Crispin's hedonism is based on the fact that even though a work of art may survive the particular object which inspires it, such as a plum, unless we keep in touch with the physical world, such as the plum orchard, there will be no frame of reference to judge the art and no new inspiration for new works of art.

The need for creating the illusion of eternality in art and the necessity for changing the subject in order to mirror nature are responses to the constancy of death, which, though accepted by Crispin when he opts for the physical world of beauty, also humbles him:

> Was he to bray this in profoundest brass
> Arointing his dreams with fugal requiems?
> Was he to company vastest things defunct
> With a blubber of tom-toms harrowing the sky?
> . . . . . .
> Because he built a cabin who once planned
> Loquacious columns by the ructive sea?
> . . . . . .
> Should he lay by the personal and make
> Of his own fate an instance of all fate?
> What is one man among so many men?
> What are so many men in such a world?
> Can one man think one thing and think it long?
> Can one man be one thing and be it long?
>
> CP, 41

But Crispin's rationalizations here are not a reflection of personal weakness; rather, they are a realization of the limitations of human achievement: "Each man must be satisfied with his own "nice shady home,' his 'cabin' where he dreams the dreams of his subjective mind."[10] So, Crispin's hedonism takes the form of a quietly sensual,

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[10]Nassar, An Anatomy of Figuration, p. 160.

modest domestic life:

> And so it came, his cabin suffled up,
> His trees were planted, his duenna brought
> Her prismy blonde and clapped her in his hands,
> The curtains flittered and the door was closed.
> Crispin, magister of a single room,
> Latched up the night. . . .
>
> CP, 42

Crispin's new poems will celebrate the mundane world. Here are some titles of poems that Stevens wrote after "The Comedian . . ." which suggest the poems that Crispin plans to compose: "Last Looks at the Lilacs," "Disillusionment at Ten O'Clock," "Colloquy with a Polish Aunt," "Hymn from a Watermelon Pavilion," and "The Revolutionists Stop for Orangeade." Eugene Nassar clearly explicates the relationship between the domestic metaphors of parts V and VI of "The Comedian . . ." and Crispin's new life: "He will set up house in a cabin (the mind), tend to his little garden (his poems). His duenna is the Will that guards his Imagination (the prismy blonde) from the sad fate of Tragedians and Realists. . . . [The] children of his desire are poems, intangibles of the spirit tinged with the imagination's blue. . . . The four daughters represent for Stevens something like four different kinds of poem, from the most ambitious and self-conscious to the most trivially descriptive."[11]

"The Comedian . . ." concludes with Crispin beginning his new career in the face of absurdity: the absurdity of the poet as the creator of fictions, and the philosophical absurdity of existence:

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[11] Nassar, An Anatomy of Figuration, pp. 168, 170.

> . . . if the anecdote
> Is false, if Crispin is a profitless
> Philosopher, beginning with green brag,
> Concluding fadedly, if as a man
> Prone to distemper he abates in taste,
> Fickle and fumbling, variable, obscure,
> Glozing his life with after-shining flicks,
> Illuminating, from a fancy gorged
> By apparition, plain and common things,
> Sequestering the fluster from the year,
> Making gulped potions from obstreperous drops,
> And so distorting, proving what he proves
> Is nothing, what can all this matter since
> The relation comes, benignly, to its end?
> CP, 45-46

Thus, the poem marks Stevens' movement from passionate defender of hedonism against the shadow of Christianity ("Sunday Morning") to a more sober acceptance of the mortal, i.e., human comforts of hedonism as spiritually necessary.

Even when the world after death is mockingly conceived, as in the "Esthétique du Mal" its conception is physical:

> After death, the non-physical people, in paradise
> Itself non-physical, may, by chance, observe
> The green corn gleaming and experience
> The minor of what we feel.
> CP, 325

Indeed, "adventurer [s] in humanity" find themselves absurdly bound to mortal limitations:

> The green corn gleams and the metaphysicals
> Lie sprawling in majors of August heat.
> CP, 325

This realization is akin to Caligula's recognition in Camus' play of the absurdity of attempting to transcend the cycle of life and death. As he

is dying, Caligula screams, "I'm still alive!"[12] Of course, Camus' heroes are frustrated by their human limitations, while the meditating mind in "Esthétique" builds towards an acceptance of reality's limits rather than wage a tragic struggle against the omnipresence of death. This optimistic attitude in which Stevens emphasizes the beauty of the world rather than the vulnerability of man in that world makes him almost unique as an existentialist thinker.

Stevens is continuously attracted to the limits of reality, for that is where one might discover the secrets it never seems to yield. This is why he is fascinated with winter, that time when reality is most bare and most comprehensible. His choice of this season as a subject for poetry becomes more frequent in the very late poems, but even in the early "The Snow Man" (1921)[13] the pattern of wresting hope from disaster is clear. Even though the dormancy of winter is evocative of death and nothingness, Stevens' meditations on it are performed in a mood of spiritual tranquillity.

In "The Snow Man" Stevens uses the period of nature's desolation as an occasion for noting that man is "nothing himself" (CP, 10). The absurdity of man's capacity to fix meanings to things is suggested: Man is nothing, and he is constrained to distinguish between

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[12]Albert Camus, Caligula and Three Other Plays, Vintage Books (New York: Alfred A. Knopf Inc., and Random House, Inc., 1958), p. 74.

[13]For date see Poems by Wallace Stevens, selected and ed. by Samuel French Morse, Vintage Books (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, Inc., and Random House, Inc., 1959), p. 171.

the "Nothing that is not there and the nothing that is." But the poet does not really leave us suspended in these shades of nothingness. His very suggestion of the paradox, i.e., that nothing is an utter blank form having the potential for becoming something via man's imaginings, leads him to optimism. The metaphor of the poem is the winter, which is a time when man may find it difficult to believe in his worthiness. This is the season when the prototypical existentialist hero begins to dwell on his angst. But for Stevens the contemplation of death is not morbid; it is the time when the imagination is most challenged to create because it has a blank canvas to work with.

A companion piece to "The Snow Man" is "Arrival at the Waldorf." In the former the narrator is oppressed by the loss of the world of nature; in the latter he flinches from too intense an experience of this physical world. This is not a contradiction; it merely proves that the imagination and physical reality must be kept in the proper balance and that that balance is different for different personalities. The Guatemalan jungle is such an overwhelming physical presence that it allows no room for the imagination to operate . (Crispin preferred the jungles of Yucatan when he was young and unaware of the need for balance). Thus, when the narrator in "Arrival at the Waldorf" returns to New York City, the shock of being in a place where nature is smothered by man-made objects leads him to the other extreme: His imagination runs amok because there is no natural material world for it to relate to. It can only feed upon itself:

Home from Guatemala, back at the Waldorf.
His arrival in the wild country of the soul,
All approaches gone, being completely there,

Where the wild poem is a substitute
For the woman one loves or ought to love,
One wild rhapsody a fake for another.
CP, 240-241

The existentialist-absurdist relationship to the physical world, then, is one of love-hate: One can have too much of the physical (or the imagined), but after fleeing into the world of imagination, the real becomes desired: "After that alien, point-blank, green and actual Guatemala."

"Extracts from Addresses to the Academy of Fine Ideas" pursues at much greater length than "Arrival at the Waldorf" various attitudes towards imagination and physical reality. The latter employs the expository method, while "Extracts . . ." uses a satirical oratory to present fine ideas about the imagination which we would all like to believe in but can not. The poem is a series of fantastic speculations on what the world would be like if "the high imagination" ruled "triumphantly" (CP, 256).

First the speaker extols the world of artificiality (the world created by the imaginative mind) over vibrant nature:

. . . Compare the silent rose of the sun
And rain, the blood-rose living in its smell,
With this paper, this dust. That states the point.

Messieurs,
It is an artificial world. . . .
CP, 252

He desires to probe "Beyond the knowledge of nakedness. . . beyond the

mind . . . ," beyond the sensual data that the mind receives:

> Rain is an unbearable tyranny. Sun is
> A monster-maker, an eye, only an eye,
> A shapener of shapes for only the eye . . .
> CP, 252-253

He would like the imagination to be free of physical reality (forgetting, of course, that the latter is essential to the operation of man's genius). The words of tribute to a natural object are preferred over the object itself, because the only thing man is sure of is his reponse to nature rather than the actuality of nature. Also, it is only in response to an object that man's genius is displayed.

In the second part the speaker goes even further in lauding the versatility of the imagination:

> The spirit laughs to see the eye believe
> And its communion take . . . . . .
> . . . . . .
> . . . Thus
> The maker of catastrophe invents the eye
> And through the eye equates ten thousand deaths
> With a single well-tempered apricot, or, say,
> An eggplant of good air.
> CP, 253

In Part III this new world of imagination in which "all men are priests" is longed for:

> If they could gather their theses into one,
> . . . . . .
> Into a single thought, thus: into a queen,
> An intercessor by innate rapport,
> Or into a dark-blue king, un roi tonnere,
> Whose merely being was his valiance,
> Panjandrum and central heart and mind of minds --
> If they could!
> CP, 254

However, this is a utopian dream: They preach and they are preaching in a land / To be described. They are preaching in a time / To be described." (CP, 254).

This preoccupation in parts I, II, and III with the imagination's search for transcendence is a reflection of the hedonist's love-hate attitude towards physical reality, an attitude which is not concealed by the comic language of the poem. But in part IV the speaker becomes more modest, more balanced, in assessing the imagination's power. Comfort in the physical world is deepened through the imagination's belief in the beauty of the visible, even though the visible is constantly dying. Life is refreshed by the belief in change perceived in nature. Thus, the man pondering the lake at the end of winter, "in April, feeble day," observes the "dead rocks" and the "Black water" (CP, 254-255). The wind blows both "in the empty place," i.e., specifically, as in the area of a particular lake, and "in an empty place," i.e. abstractly in nature. Merely as an abstraction, nature is sterile, but she is blessed by the imagination's ability to particularize it, change it from "an" to "the." Existence (man's existence) precedes essence (nature's essence) in that the former shapes the latter into something comprehensible. The mind subjectively conceives spring:

> . . . If,
> When he looked, the water ran up the air or grew white
> Against the edge of the ice, the abstraction would
> Be broken and winter would be broken and done,
> And being would be being himself again,
> Being, becoming seeing and feeling and self,
> Black water breaking into reality.
>
> CP, 255

Not only does the imagination perceive and maintain a sense of beauty for man; it also compulsively improvises ideas out of the confusion of external things and chooses one which it can temporarily hold on to. In part V the speaker says:

> The law of chaos is the law of ideas,
> Of improvisations and seasons of belief.
>
> Ideas are men. The mass of meaning and
> The mass of men are one. Chaos is not
>
> The mass of meaning. It is three or four
> Ideas, or, say, five men or, possibly, six.
>
> In the end, these philosophic assassins pull
> Revolvers and shoot each other. One remains.
>
> The mass of meaning becomes composed again.
> CP, 255-256

The assassin sings a song "In the high imagination, triumphantly."

But being a poet with an existentialist-absurdist's perspective, Stevens has his speaker continue to refine his position. The "systematic thinking" that the speaker mentioned in part V he rejects in part VI: "To think it is to think the way to death . . ." (CP, 256). The speaker's attitude here seems to be the one most suitable to a hedonist's viewpoint, though it is also quite congenial to anyone. He realizes that the most satisfying adjustment to physical reality comes when he will be able to lose himself in the physical world and no longer be preoccupied with what is material and what is imagination. We should notice, however, that since the only constant for Stevens is change, it is fitting that he undercuts any adjustment by the speaker to the world with the speculative and conditional mood. Existentialist

man, after all, is not certain of many things:

> He wanted that,
> To face the weather and be unable to tell
> How much of it was light and how much thought. . .
> CP, 257

The speaker in part VII seems to be satisfied with his adjustment to physical reality, "the weather." He accepts the fact that perceiving objective reality is an impossibility, and that all that he can expect from his imagination is that it inform him about himself and his subjective relation to the world:

> To believe in the weather, and in the things and men
> Of the weather and in one's self, as part of that
> And nothing more.
> CP, 258

He craves certainty about this to the extent that he would like to possess the perfect truth about himself and his relation to the world:

> And naked of any illusion, in poverty,
> In the exactest poverty, if then
> One breathed the cold evening, the deepest inhalation
> Would come from that return to the subtle centre.
> CP, 258

The speaker does not realize the irony of such a wish, for to know the truth about one's self is impossible in the existential world in which one lives. As Stevens says in "The Well-Dressed Man with a Beard": "It can never be satisfied, the mind, never" (CP, 247).

The final section of "Extracts . . ." states the problem of

imagination and reality in terms of evil and good, war and peace. The speaker is unable to determine if evil ends. However, he speculates and hopes that

> . . . If earth dissolves
> Its evil after death, it dissolves it while
> We live. . . .
>
> CP, 259

The final two lines of the poem suggest the only human answer to the question of evil:

> Behold the men in helmets borne on steel,
> Discolored, how they are going to defeat.
>
> CP, 259

Men "are going to defeat" not only because they are dying, but because they are helpless to prevent war. But the Homeric image in the penultimate line suggests that even when man is at his worst, he attains dignity. This conclusion is a statement of partial faith in the physical world and of partial acceptance of the death which belongs to that world.

One of Stevens' few direct statements of religious faith in the sensual world he loves is "Landscape with Boat." The man described in the poem is a comical contradition, a "floribund ascetic." He has denied himself the pleasures of this material world as payment for immortal favor. He has failed to see that heavenly qualities may exist in tangible things:

> He never supposed divine
> Things might not look divine, nor that if nothing
> Was divine then all things were, the world itself,
> And that if nothing was the truth, then all
> Things were the truth, the world itself was the truth.
>
> CP, 242

This protagonist represents a literal negation of Stevens' faith in the miraculous process of nature - - birth, growth, death. Yet the handling of this "anti-master-man" reveals Stevens' bold confidence in the power of his epistemology to withstand the doubts of such an unimaginative man. Stevens heightens the reader's awareness of the ephemeral quality of hedonistic joy by perceiving it in the distant, illusory subjunctive. The wished-for ideal of the poet is presented in terms of what the philistine has missed:

> Had he been better able to suppose:
> . . . . . .
> He might observe
> A yellow wine and follow a steamer's track
> And say, "The things I hum appears to be
> The rhythm of this celestial pantomime."
> CP, 243

Stevens' final lines in "Local Objects," one of his last poems (1955),[14] are an appropriate conclusion to a discussion of his "religion of hedonism." Obviously his emphasis on this mortal world precludes him from being considered religious in the traditional sense. But if his subject matter is not traditionally religious, his mood certainly is:

> The few things, the objects of insight, the integrations
> Of feeling, the things that came of their own accord,
> Because he desired without knowing quite what,
>
> That were the moments of the classic, the beautiful.
> These were the serene he had always been approaching . . .
> OP, 112

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[14] For date see OP, 300.

## CHAPTER IV

## POETRY AS EXISTENTIAL SUBJECT

We have examined Stevens philosophic modernity in his approach to imagination and reality in terms of the absurd, and in our discussion of his commitment to hedonism we have observed how he wrestles with the conditions of Camus' world. Now we will turn to Stevens' favorite subject of aesthetics, specifically of poets and of the art of poetry as subjects for poems.

The preoccupation of poems with poetry is common to the Romantic and Post-Romantic ages, and the traditional explanation for the pre-occupation -- in the cases of Coleridge, Keats, James Joyce and Hart Crane, for example -- is that art is a refuge from life. Certainly this motive is present in Wallace Stevens' treatment of the subject of poetry. He, too, wants to create an ideal world. But Stevens adds another element in his poems: an awareness of paradox. He is always aware that poetry must be responsive to the laws of life: As life withers, alters, dies, and is reborn, poetry must also mirror change to avoid staleness.

Frank Doggett's description of Stevens' paradoxical treatment of time and change is poetic itself:

> The increasing age of time weighs upon each day with today the oldest of all; yet that day's birth makes it the newest. . . . Stevens discerns another paradox in the flux in that it is a progress that never advances. Although

> there is one direction to the uninterrupted flow of time, each moment and each life is a beginning all over again. In Stevens' sense of it, the course of time is not that of a development . . . [It is] the meeting of doom and genesis in each moment. . . .[1]

Man's search for beauty in his paintings, his dances, his poems, is frustrating, then, because no sooner has he imagined something fresh than it becomes stale. Only in the mind's imaginings do things remain fresh. One can only believe in one's art, because even though it is fixed, it represents an intense moment of perpetual becoming when the artist first glimpsed in his mind a perfectly fresh idea, a "the," and tried his best to record it. These creations of the artist are an attempt to recapture that moment when "one first heard of the truth . . . the the" ("The Man on the Dump," CP, 203). But each day becomes old, and although it is exhilirating, it is also frightening:

> Now in the time of spring. . .
> . . . . . .
> One feels the purifying change. One rejects
> The trash.
>
> That's the moment when the moon creeps up
> To the bubbling of bassoons. That's the time
> One looks at the elephant-colorings of tires.
> Everything is shed; and the moon comes up as the moon
> (All its images are in the dump) and you see
> As a man (not like an image of a man),
> You see the moon rise in an empty sky.
> CP, 202

So, face to face with the bare reality of things, one struggles to capture ones impressions of it in art, even though one is aware that

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[1] "Wallace Stevens' River that Flows Nowhere," Chicago Review, XV (Summer-Autumn, 1962), 71-72.

one's original impressions will be lost, become trash, in the time that it takes to translate the experience into art form. (Despite the truth of this absurdity, a work of art, even if it is about the subject of absurdity, can, absurdly enough, continue to give pleasure). "The imperfect" is Stevens' "paradise" ("The Poems of Our Climate," CP, 194). A static paradise is desired only ideally; actually, it is intimidating: Beauty for man must be perceived in terms of change if it is to mirror our reality.

This preoccupation with these very normal or constant paradoxes of existence is existentialism. There are all kinds of existentialism, and it is consistent with the paradox involved in trying to perceive with certainty (discussed in the above analysis of "The Comedian as the Letter C") that each existentialist artist puts his special stamp on existentialism. Why do I insist on the term vis-à-vis Stevens if it is so ambiguous? The point is that it does have a meaning, a common center, and Stevens can not be eliminated from that heritage. The common center contains the following elements (with the first containing the seeds of the others): 1) a vision of man as the center of a war between reason and emotion (as with Dostoevsky's Underground Man); 2) the discovery of the "death of God;" 3) the preoccupation with the self -- the Freudian "ego;" 4) Heidegger's thoughts on "Being" and "being;" and 5) Camus' absurd anti-heroes. These elements are implicit throughout Stevens' work, not merely in his humorous treatment of them in "The Comedian."

An existentialist reading of Stevens does not straight-jacket

his attitudes. James Baird flinches from using the term on the grounds that it places Stevens in the French school.[2] If that were the case, I too would disapprove of the term, for Stevens does not share Sartre's pessimism. But let us hope that readers are not as unsophisticated in their knowledge of existentialism as Baird fears.[3] Much is missed, I submit, if we are unable to see that Stevens transforms Dostoevsky's exploration of the tension between reason and emotion and similarly transforms Heidegger's dichotomy of "Being" (a term he uses to describe existence and the cycle of nature as an impersonal idea) and "being" (a term he applies to man's very personal sense of his own existence)[4] into a conflict between reality and imagination.[5] Indeed, James Baird's literary description of Stevens' language of the self seems

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[2]Baird, p. 268.

[3]Baird talks in passing of Stevens' "affinities" with Jean Wahl's "philosophy of existence," p. 268. Baird quotes Wahl's definition of this philosophy, yet the fact is that it is nothing but a description of existentialism, e.g., "[M]an is the being who places in question his own existence, who stakes it play by play, who subjects it [willfully] to danger." Ibid., p. 269. Baird, though, is concerned with studying Stevens' architecture of the dome, not in the philosophy behind Stevens' poetry.

[4]See Martin Heidegger, "The Way Back Into the Ground of Metaphysics, in Existentialism from Dostoevsky to Sartre, tr. and ed. by Walter Kaufmann, Meridian Books (Cleveland: World Publishing Co., 1956), pp. 206-221, passim.

[5]The three references to Heidegger in Letters, 758, 839, 845 all reveal an intense interest and excitement concerning him. In one of them Stevens says, "You will remember that I told you that Heidegger lives in Fribourg. If you attend any of his lectures, or even see him, tell me about him because it will help to make him real." (The letter of June 30, 1954 to Peter H. Lee in Letters, 839).

to me to be a just example of Heidegger's "metaphysical conception of human selfhood": [6] "/T/he final requirement would seem to be that which he exacted of himself: the poet's house as his total process, the discipline of the mind free to itself alone, answering to no traditional authority and strictly exemplifying the self that determined it. The abstraction is of the self and only that. . . ./Stevens'/ poetry . . . struggles toward the unique self shaped from the aboriginal source in man."[7]

In a letter to Henry Church, Stevens exemplifies Baird's definition:

> Here is a little note by a Scot on Kierkegaard. I like the conclusion that unless one is abnormal one ceases to exist as part of civilization since civilization is itself abnormal. That is not quite what he says but it is involved. I don't wonder therefore that he winds up with nothing at all since what is "vague and rhetorical" is certainly nothing at all. I send this to you because you have mentioned Kierkegaard. For myself, the inaccessible jewel is the normal and all of life, in poetry, is the difficult pursuit of just that. [8]

We notice in this letter that even though Stevens admits to liking Kierkegaard's conclusion about being abnormal, he says he will have none of it. The fact is, though, that the pursuit of "the inaccessible jewel" is "abnormal." Kierkegaard was most probably talking about either the anxieties developed in a stark, industrial society or, more likely, the paradox involved in making an absurd leap of faith in fear and

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[6]Heidegger, p. 215.

[7]Baird, pp. 35, 76.

[8]The letter of January 21, 1946 in Letters, 521 (italics mine).

trembling, i.e., in the face of reason, as in the Abraham and Isaac story. Stevens' poetry certainly does reveal a sympathy with these anxieties. The pursuit of the normal does not have to be "difficult" unless, in the case of the honest mind, one struggles with unanswerable questions and strives for a modus vivendi with them. And such honest minds are "abnormal" or rare, in both Kierkegaard's and Stevens' terms.

In a poem such as "To the One of Fictive Music" (as well as "Peter Quince at the Clavier" and "Le Monocle de Mon Oncle," to name just a few others) we observe how in joyously explaining the paradoxical relationships between imagination and reality Stevens comes to terms with the paradoxical nature of existence.

The imagination is extolled for its power to draw the poet into the experience of life, to make man one with the external world, yet apparently beyond it:

> Now, of the music summoned by the birth
> That separates us from the wind and sea,
> Yet leaves us in them, until earth becomes,
> By being so much of the things we are,
> Gross effigy and simulacrum . . .
> CP, 87

The music that the goddess of poetry inspires the poet to compose seems more vivid than the object from which the poet draws his inspiration. If the imagination is what we colloquially call "unreal," then why does the physical world, the "real," seem less real than the supposedly unreal? The answer is that those forms which constitute what the human mind considers to be the tangible world are unfeeling, immobile objects; they achieve life only through the mind's imaginative perception of them.

The mind is what "separates us from the wind and sea." Once the mind perceives a wave, the imagination improves upon it. Ordinary reality is transcended, becoming "gross effigy and simulacrum."

Reality, however, is the catalyst for the imagination. Not only that, Stevens never forgets that the imagination is only important in so far as it enables him to come to terms with the corporeal universe: Therefore, Stevens avoids the abyss of the purely imaginative, ethereal life. This is the reason why the imagination untouched by reality is "spurned" (CP, 88). On the other hand, Stevens also realizes that a distance from the visible world is necessary in order to preserve poetry as poetry. Poetry recharges our view of the world, and, therefore, keeps it beautiful for us. Once the poet allows his harmonics to draw "Too near" to tangible objects, once they are "too clear," the world of creative possibilities will be lost, i.e., the imagination will deteriorate; the poet will lose his role as vates. So for these reasons the imagination is "craved" (CP, 88). Thus, a balance must be achieved:

> . . . saving a little to endow
> Our feigning with the strange unlike, whence springs
> The difference that heavenly pity brings.
> CP, 88

In "Man Carrying Thing" Stevens frames the same paradox this way: "The poem must resist the intelligence / Almost successfully" (CP, 350). Again, his justification for this resistance is partly to escape from the blankness of the real world as well as the result of his attempt to mirror the mind's difficulty in fathoming the real world.

The precarious relationship between the substantial world and

the poetic process is explored further in "The Idea of Order at Key West." The speaker of the poem is describing the imaginative flight of a poet, the "she" of the poem. He constantly insists on the beauty of her response to the music of the sea. Her response is more important than the sea itself; the creative act is celebrated:

> It may be that in all her phrases stirred
> The grinding water and the gasping wind;
> But it was she and not the wind we heard.
> CP, 129

This is similar to the poetic effect in Keats's "Ode to a Nightingale": We do not hear the bird; we hear Keats's ecstasy over it. Stevens' imagery is abstract:

> She was the single artificer of the world
> In which she sang. And when she sang, the sea,
> Whatever self it had, became the self
> That was her song, for she was the maker.
> CP, 129

whereas Keats's is specific:

> Already with thee! tender is the night,
> And haply the Queen-Moon is on her throne . . .[9]

While the two poets both seem to be soaring beyond reality, their attitudes toward poetry are different. Keats writes mainly to escape from reality; Stevens writes to embellish reality (though, admittedly, this involves an escape from blank reality). But Stevens

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[9]Poetical Works of John Keats, ed. by J.W. Garrod (2nd ed., Oxford: Oxford University Press, 1958), iv, 5-6.

more easily accepts "The weariness, the fever, and the fret" of human misery which haunts Keats.

The difference in their stances is readily seen in the conclusion to their respective poems. The poetic flight in "The Idea of Order" actually continues after the poem ends. It is true that the imagination's flight is described in the past tense, but her accomplishment is cause for new joy. She knows, as the poetic voice in Keats's "Ode" does not, that she will write another poem. Her inspiration will be another external object or perhaps the sea again. As Tindall says, "the imagination never touches the same thing twice in the same way."[10] Keats uses poetry to escape from life. In the midst of his joy with the nightingale's immortal song he complains: "But here there is no light." He rejects the poetic flight at the end: "Was it a vision, or a waking dream?"

There is no suggestion of incredulity with Wallace Stevens' poetry. His work does not require him or us to suspend our disbelief, unlike the introduction to "The Fall of Hyperion," to name just one more of Keats's poems. Stevens makes poetry seem like the most natural thing in the world; this is the only incredible thing about his work. He can compose a poem on anything because external and internal reality is present in the observing of anything.

The conclusion to "Idea of Order" does not call for a breaking of a mood; it is a revelation of the way in which a poet learns from

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[10]William York Tindall, Wallace Stevens (Minneapolis: University of Minnesota Press, 1961), p. 39.

nature:

> The lights in the fishing boats at anchor there,
> As the night descended, tilting in the air,
> Mastered the night and portioned out the sea,
> Fixing emblazoned zones and fiery poles,
> Arranging, deepening, enchanting night.
> CP, 130

The poem is a discovery of the wonder of the poet's poetry-making powers. It concludes:

> Oh! Blessed rage for order, pale Ramon,
> The maker's rage to order words of the sea,
> Words of the fragrant portals, dimly-starred,
> And of ourselves and of our origins,
> In ghostlier demarcations, keener sounds.
> CP, 130

Thus, "The Idea of Order at Key West" defines the material world in terms of what the imagination can create out of it. There is no fixed reality as far as the mind can tell, and it would be boring if it were otherwise.

Concerning this question of reality and appearance in "Key West," Riddel says that it "discreetly rejects the implication that the imagination has any causal effect on the material."[11] This comment, while true, misses Stevens' central approach to reality, which is that the imagination gives to the mind the meaning of reality. The external world may remain the same and meaningless, but that is irrelevant,

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[11]Joseph Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye: The Poetry and Poetics of Wallace Stevens (Baton Rouge: Louisiana State University Press, 1965), p. 32.

because we can never determine just what that external reality is anyway.

This ignorance of ours, coupled with our necessity to rely on certain beliefs about the external world, leads without poetry to anxiousness. Ther is no vision of God to sustain us, so the new God must be poetic imagination: "Poetry/ Exceeding music must take the place/ Of empty heaven and its hymns" (The Man With the Blue Guitar," CP, 167). The inspiration of nature is the basis of this new "religion."

Here, in "The Man with the Blue Guitar," as later in "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," Stevens' new world is one in which "the lights, the definitions,/. . ./. . . the rotted names" (CP, 183) are to be thrown away:

> How should you walk in that space and know
> Nothing of the madness of space,
>
> Nothing of its jocular procreations?
> Throw the lights away. Nothing must stand
>
> Between you and the shapes you take
> When the crust of shape has been destroyed.
>
> You as you are? You are yourself.
> The blue guitar surprises you.
>
> CP, 183

More than content in his newly found independence, the man with the blue guitar discovers the existential joy of creativity, but his music must sustain itself on contemporary reality. This means that the modern poet's golden music must reflect and transform the mechanical, industrial, urban world he inhabits:

> Ecce, Oxidia is the seed
> Dropped out of this amber-ember pod,

Oxidia is the soot of fire,
Oxidia is Olympia.

CP, 182

Stevens clearly insists in "Of Modern Poetry" that the meditative poet should "speak words that in the ear. / In the delicatest ear of the mind, repeat/ Exactly, that which it wants to hear. . . . " But one can thus only attain a subjective impalpable precision ("the finding of a satisfaction," CP, 240). The poet dedicates himself to the composing of "Sounds. . . wholly/ Containing the mind, below which it cannot descend, / Beyond which it has no will to rise" (CP, 240). There is, of course, a negative reference in the above-quoted lines to the romantic desire for transcendence of the mind through the emotions, but unless we define "will" to mean ability rather than desire, "Of Modern Poetry" is a clear statement of the acceptance of things as they are.

There are two "realities" in Wallace Stevens' verse, the free or imaginative and the confined or the unimaginative, and when the reality is the intolerable latter, the internal life of the imagination clogs. The imagination, we remember from "To the One of Fictive Music," is invoked not to flee from the material world but to perceive and change it despite the fact that it can not be clearly understood, is still "the same insoluble lump" (CP, 45):

Yet not too like, yet not so like to be
Too near, too clear, saving a little to endow
Our feigning with the strange unlike, whence springs
The difference that heavenly pity brings.
. . . . . .

The imagination that we spurned and crave.
CP, 88

The paradox of the poetic occupation redounds even to grammatical syntax in "The Creations of Sound." The poem is a meditation on the poet as egoist. The tone is conditional, which underlines the absurdity, the tenuousness of the poet as vates: "If the poetry of X was music,/ . . . we should not know/ That X is an obstruction, a man/ Too exactly himself. . . ." But X is a bad poet, and Stevens proceeds to muse that were X a fine artist, X would know that he can only go so far in his music. His "speech in not dirty silence/ Clarified. It is silence made still dirtier" (CP, 311).

"Creations," then, is concerned with the absurd desire of the poet for poetry beyond the world: ". . . there are words/ Better without an author, without a poet/ . . . / . . . rising in speech we do not speak" (CP, 310-311).

Stevens says X fails because "His poems are not of the second part of life./ They do not make the visible a little hard/ To see. . ." (CP, 311). The visible contains more and less than it appears to. We can not exhaust it; therefore, we must transform disharmonious realities into harmonious creations of sound.

"The Creations of Sound" is an especially important poem on the subject of poetry because it contains both an existential awareness of the poet's difficulties in the face of external reality and a very cheerful acceptance of these difficulties. The crowning expression of

this double awareness is the long poem "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction."

In struggling to shape a subjective reality by language, man searches for the perfect poem that will mirror the mind's desire. For Stevens, then, the words of the poet are notes toward a supreme fiction:

> The poem refreshes life so that we share,
> For a moment, the first idea. . . . It satisfies
> Belief in an immaculate beginning
>
> And sends us, winged by an unconscious will,
> To an immaculate end. . . .
>
> CP, 382

Poetry is the supreme fiction because it fills a religious need, allowing man to evade material reality:

> The essential theme [of "Notes. . ."] is that the intense desire for knowledge of the First Idea can only be satisfied, in some measure, by a shunting of the imagination to functions it can handle, to "brushings," "wettings," "roofings," "virginals," and "first fruits" (metaphors), "flickings" and "bloodings." All these are evasions of the "sun" which cannot be borne without a roof . . . [or some myth-making device]." [12]

Throughout "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction" there is a trust that "the very act of making song, however incomplete, and precisely because imcomplete, implies the existence of the full diapason in another world. . . ."[13] This other world is not the world after death but the idealized world in the deepest longings of the imagination.

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[12]Nassar, An Anatomy of Figuration, pp. 191-192.

[13]Justus George Lawler, "The Poet, the Metaphysician and the Desire for God," Downside Review, LXXXIV (July, 1966), 304.

This comment is borne out by Stevens' description of modern man's anxiety: "[W]e live in a place/ That is not our own and, much more, not ourselves/ And hard it is in spite of blazoned days" (CP, 383).

Indeed, it takes no modicum of spiritual strength to adjust to " a universe of inconstancy" (CP, 389); but the only relevant, therefore permanent, contribution that one can make to art is to keep changing the subject pleasingly. One adjusts to absurdity, then, only by participating in the absurd:

> And where we live and everywhere we live,
>
> As in the top-cloud of a May night-evening,
> As in the courage of the ignorant man,
> Who chants by book, in the heat of the scholar, who writes
>
> The book, hot for another accessible bliss:
> The fluctuations of certainty, the change
> Of degrees of perception in the scholar's dark.
> CP, 395

This uncertainty does not cause the poet much fear and trembling. Stevens' attitude, as Riddel suggests, removes him from the existential dilemma because of his "passion for yes."[14] Stevens does so resolve the dilemma, but this, I think, does not prevent him from being considered an existentialist poet. Even if the answer is yes, the no, as we have consistently seen, is always seriously considered, sometimes, as in "The Man Whose Pharnyx Was Bad" (which laments "The malady of quotidian," CP, 96), to the exclusion

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[14]Riddel, The Clairvoyant Eye, p. 25.

of yes.

Of course, there are many poems which appear to exclude the no of a forbidding reality, but even when they seem to approach pure joyous solipsism, as in "A Rabbit as King of the Ghosts," the speaker is aware of what he has to fear. This awareness, which is revealed through the rabbit's fixated diatribe against the ghostly reality of the cat (shown in the following quotation), provides the balancing, existential tension:

> There was the cat slopping its milk all day,
> Fat cat, red tongue, green mind, white milk
> And August the most peaceful month.
> To be, in the grass, in the peacefullest time,
> Without that monument of cat,
> The cat forgotten in the moon.
>
> CP, 209

Stevens' statements concerning the existential nature of reality are clear enough. They reveal that humble approach to knowledge, that realization of the tenuous certainty of the senses, which typifies the existentialist sensibility. Stevens defines this sensibility in his essay on "The Relation Between Poetry and Painting":

> "Simone Weil in La Pesanteur et La Grâce has a chapter on what she calls decreation. She says that decreation is . . . /the movement/ from the created to the uncreated, but that destruction is . . . /the movement/ from the created to nothingness. Modern reality is a reality of decreation, in which our revelations are not the revelation of beliefs, but the precious portents of our own powers. The greatest truths we could hope to discover, in whatever we field we discovered it, is that man's truth is the final resolution of everything." [15]

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[15] The Neccessary Angel: Essays on Reality and the Imagination (New York: Arthur A. Knopf, Inc., 1951), pp. 174-175.

Earlier, in a letter to Hi Simons, Stevens says:

> "It is a process of passing from hopeless waste to hopeful waste. This is not pessimism. The world is completely waste, but it is a waste always full of portentous lustres." [16]

In the third section of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction," It Must Give Pleasure, this excited feeling bursts forth:

> . . . But to impose is not
> To discover. To discover an order as of
> A season, to discover summer and know it,
>
> To discover winter and know it well, to find,
> Not to impose, not to have reasoned at all,
> Out of nothing to have come on major weather.
>
> It is possible, possible, possible.
> CP, 403-404

This epistemological paradox can be located in Santayana's philosophical work, Scepticism and Animal Faith:

> "When by a difficult suspension of judgment I have deprived a given image of all adventitious significance, when it is taken neither for the manifestation of a substance nor for an idea in the mind nor for an event in the world, but simply if a colour for that colour, and if music for that music, and if a face for that face, then an immense cognitive certitude comes to compensate me for so much cognitive abstension. My scepticism has at last touched bottom and my doubt has found honourable rest in the absolutely indubitable." [17]

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[16] See the letter of August 27, 1940 in Letters, 367 (cf. OP, 49).

[17] George Santayana, Scepticism and Animal Faith (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1923), p. 74, quoted in David P. Young, "A Skeptical Music: Stevens and Santayana," Criticism, VII (Summer, 1965), 270.

Thus, the mind's mortal limitations become a miraculous source of strength rather than of abysmal brooding, or as Santayana, who was a kind of mentor to Stevens,[18] says: "The function of mind, of poetry . . . /is to create/ all those private perspectives and those emotions of wonder, adventure, curiosity and laughter which omniscience would exclude."[19]

Of course, this "cognitive certitude" can not be proved except as an illusion essential to poetic and philosophic faith. One student of Stevens' poetry, James Henry Lovell, Jr., employs Santayana's terms in explaining the "form of Stevens' poetry," and he summarizes Santayana's discussion of cognition by framing it in what I would call an existential paradox: "/C/ognition," says, Lovell, itself is a fiction":

> "Structure is form considered inhumanly -- as an assemblage of parts rather than a recognizable shape. Dualism, or opposition of forces, is inherently a structure. The structure of Stevens' poems is a duplication of the structure of cognition. The value of this structure is that it refreshes life by presenting to us the struggle for reality. We know again the freshness of chaos and the /fictive/ order of reality. This attempt asks that we look at art as the supreme fiction, where cognition itself is a fiction." 20

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[18] See the letter of January 4, 1945 to José Rodríguez Feo in Letters, 481-482.

[19] Santayana quoted by Edward Guereschi, "'The Comedian as the Letter C': Wallace Stevens' Anti-Mythological Poem," The Centennial Review, VIII (Fall, 1964), 468.

[20] "Form and Structure in the Poetry of Wallace Stevens," DA, XXIV (1963), 2036-2037 (Vanderbilt).

In the last volume of poems which Stevens published, The Auroras of Autumn (1950), the world is still "The same insoluble lump" (CP, 45) that it was for Crispin in "The Comedian as the Letter C" (1921-22) thirty years before. The difference for Stevens is that now, for example, in "A Primitive Like an Orb", he is sure that poetry is an accurate reflection of absurdity:

> We do not prove the existence of the poem.
> It is something seen and known in lesser poems.
> It is the huge, high harmony that sounds
> A little and a little, suddenly,
> By means of a separate sense. It is and it
> Is not and, therefore, is . . . .
>
> CP, 440

Each poem struggles toward "The essential poem at the centre of things (CP, 440). Every time poetry is written to approach "the central poem, It is/ As if the central poem became the world, / And the world the central poem. . ." (CP, 441). At the core of the world is "the giant of nothingness"; nevertheless, the poet faces the absurd, undauntedly pursuing "his fated eccentricity, / As a part, but part, but tenacious particle, / Of the skeleton of the ether" (CP, 443) that comprises the earth as we know it.

## CHAPTER V

## THE FEAR AND BLISS OF PURE MEDITATION

Although Stevens was always working with the meditative poem, he became exclusively absorbed in perfecting the genre in The Auroras of Autumn and The Rock volumes and in his very last poems published in Opus Posthumous. Louis I. Martz[1] and Joseph N. Riddel[2] have elucidated the qualities of Stevens' meditative style. The purpose of my study of this style is to examine its existential qualities.

The first two poems to be discussed, "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds" and "Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb," are alternative companion pieces on the post-Nietzschean world. In the former it is obvious to the speaker that the heavens are no longer filled with divine wonder infused by God's presence. The firmament is only a "drifting waste" (CP, 56). But the poet's vision is really not so nihilistic, even though his subject certainly is. What he is searching for is a more proper, i.e., modern, way of addressing the clouds that float in the now empty heavens. The point here is that there is still something marvelous about the vastnesses of space.

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[1]"Wallace Stevens: The World as Meditation," Yale Review, XLVII (Summer, 1958), 517-536.

[2]"Wallace Stevens' 'Visibility of Thought,' " PMLA, LXXVII (September, 1962), 482-498.

There is much to celebrate, and this is why Stevens exhorts the pessimistic "ponderers" to find

> . . . the music of meet resignation; these
> The responsive, still sustaining pomps for you
> To magnify. . . .
>
> CP, 56

"Of Heaven Considered as a Tomb," unlike "On the Manner of Addressing Clouds," presents the speaker experiencing a nightmarish vision of the "spiritous passage into nothingness" (CP, 56). The aesthetic quality of empty space is not introduced; this is because space is being contemplated for what it has traditionally represented: the Judaeo-Christian heaven. With the vastness of space uninhabited by God, the poet imagines the horror of "one abysmal night" when starlight shall disappear. The stars will be seen as "dark comedians" in "their icy Elysée," indifferent to the misery of man.

What possibilities are now open to man? The answer is found in the above discussion of "Notes toward a Supreme Fiction": Man must create his own fictions. The optimistic, existential man turns this necessity into a new kind of heroism in which he asserts his humanity. "[A] world without God or gods removes from man the solace of his tragic defeat by fate; no longer subordinate to dominant forces, he is ironically dependent on his imperfections as a mark of humanity."[3]

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[3]Joseph N. Riddel, "The Metaphysical Changes of Stevens' 'Esthétique du Mal,' " TCL, VII (July, 1961), 71.

The condition of man in this new world is painted for us in an early poem, "Six Significant Landscapes." The frailty of man and the limitations of his ability to perceive are subtly evolved in six vignettes. The delicateness of the Haiku technique of Oriental poetry which Stevens imitates underlines the vulnerability of man and also suggests his dignity.

In the first landscape we see an old man whose relationship to nature is compared to a random larkspur or pine tree waving in the wind. It all seems very arbitrary to the naked eye: Life simply is; the human ego is ignored. The second Haiku presents Beauty, which Stevens introduces in the image of the evening as a subtle perfume. Death appears in the third poem in an ironic way. The speaker pridefully compares his shadow with a tree's. Although he convinces himself that he is taller, because he possesses an imagination to "reach right up to the sun," he is chilled to discover "The way the ants crawl/ In and out of my shadow" (CP, 74). Once the human ego is introduced in the poem, we see it discovering the horrors of mortality. The ego craves permanence.

The initial mood of simplicity and lucidity is again evoked in sections IV and V. A stillness is created in the reader's mind through the images of the stars and their infinite vastness and wonder. The human presence is again absent.

The concluding poem addresses itself to the human element in terms of the subjectivity of cognition. The poet says that our view of the world is predetermined by our posture towards it. We can never

move beyond our minds; we can never be sure that the world is really what we think it is:

> Rationalists, wearing square hats,
> Think, in square rooms,
> . . . . . .
> If they tried rhomboids,
> . . . . . .
> Rationalists would wear sombreros.
> CP, 75

There is an irony in the fact that these rationalists do choose the hats they wear, and, thus, are able to determine the way they look at the world. However, the point is that whatever they choose to wear will give them a one-sided view of the world. One can keep changing hats, but the number of hats is inexhaustible. There is no such thing as an objective hat.

Despite its picture of man's smallness in the universe, "Six Significant Landscapes" (significant of man's insignificance) concludes optimistically: Although the final sketch emphasizes man's inherited myopia of perception, its very wittiness simultaneously demonstrates man's talent for winning small triumphs over his weaknesses through his sense of irony.

"Negation" is a more complicated response than "Six Significant Landscapes" to the humiliating reality of man's limitations. In the latter there is a cheerful acceptance of the infinity of the universe and the microscopic dimensions of man; in the former there is the bitter comment concerning man's purpose: "For this, then, we endure brief lives" (CP, 98).

"Negation" describes the creator as a force overwhelmed with "an afflatus that persists" (CP, 98) through trial and error. This seems to be a veiled reference to Darwin's theory of natural selection: God is both "blind" and yet "struggling toward his harmonious whole" (CP, 97). The following lines, "Rejecting intermediate parts, / Horrors and falsities and wrongs," can be interpreted as a cynical explanation of the evolutionary process: Man is merely part of an imperfect, though marvelous, experiment in which even God is "overwhelmed" (CP, 98). This is intolerable to man. His ego demands that he find some sign that he is the goal of this "harmonious whole" that is being sought.

Yet the poem's conclusion is a dramatic switch from the previous negation of purpose:

> For this, then, we endure brief lives.
> The evanescent symmetries
> From that meticulous potter's thumb.
> CP, 98

These "evanescent symmetries" are blessed moments of the imagination's "blue." It is for them that we endure. The phrase "meticulous potter's thumb" raises questions of man's doubt and faith in universal order and purpose: On the one hand, the potter seems meticulous, so his plan for man must have a logic to it, even if it is beyond man's understanding: on the other hand, given man's limited perceptions, his sense of the Creator's meticulousness is merely a hope. We can see how Stevens turned from this paradox concerning epistemological questions to the hedonism of "Sunday Morning", written in the same period (1915), which finds positive comfort in the mind's experience of the present moment.

Stevens' adjustment to this paradox was a permanent one. In a poem written in 1938, "The Poems of Our Climate," he celebrates mortal beauty, not ideal Beauty. Part I considers the ideal in the forms of "Clear water in a brilliant bowl, / Pink and white carnations," but part II rejects "this complete simplicity" (CP, 193): The ego craves "More than a world of white and snowy scents" (CP, 194). Stevens' preference is for beauty with a small "b", i.e., imperfect beauty, which reflects the pattern of life as it is lived, rather than the aesthetic ideal which is frozen perfection. The latter is unfulfilling to the mortal mind. The laws of psychology are such that the mind is bored with cold perfection: "There would still remain the never-resting mind, / So that one would want to escape." Man finds joy in those things which imitate his own finitude:

> The imperfect is our paradise,
> Note that, in this bitterness, delight,
> Since the imperfect is so hot in us,
> Lies in flawed words and stubborn sounds.
> CP, 194

By meditating on the processes of nature, particularly the cycle of the seasons, Stevens surmounts the ugliness of death. In "Like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" Stevens encounters the coming of winter and recalls Walt Whitman's celebration of death in "Out of the Cradle Endlessly Rocking.": "Like Walt Whitman walking along a ruddy shore" (CP, 150),

> He is singing and chanting the things that are part of him,
> The worlds that were and will be, death and day.
> Nothing is final, he chants"
> CP, 150

The stark beauty of November, symptomatic of the coming of death, teaches the perceptive viewer that the seeming eccentricities of nature, such as the "leafless" trees and their apparent "blackness," are "the base of design" (CP, 151). Man creates because of death; he constantly searching for paradise, though he will not find it. It is in the struggle that man carries on that he creates the future in the present: "We should die except for Death":

> If ever the search for a tranquil belief should end,
> The future might stop emerging out of the past,
> Out of what is full of us; yet the search
> And the future emerging out of us seem to be one.[4]

The mood of "Like Decorations" is prompted by autumn and the falling leaves, which suggest the death of all noble things. Further on Stevens pessimistically asks, "Can all men, together, avenge/ One of the leaves that have fallen in autumn?" (CP, 158). The hopeful answer is found in one's acceptance of winter as the time when the gorgeousness of summer is to be dreamed of and prepared for rather than as a time of despair: "the wise man avenges by building his city in snow" (CP, 158).

"[T]he wise man . . . building his city in snow" is a symbol of the existentialist hero accepting the absurdity of death. Stone would

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[4]This concept that the future and the past are incarnated in the present is discussed in the beginning of Chapter IV, which explains Stevens' theory that poetry must respond of the laws of nature. "The Man on the Dump," discussed in Chapter IV, exemplifies this theory. The image of the incarnation of the past, present, and future into one circular flow, as in Stevens' symbol of the "river that flows nowhere, like a sea" in "The River of Rivers in Connecticut" (CP, 533), reappears in a number of other poems, as we shall see.

forestall the inevitable decay, but since change and death compel new creation, and, therefore, are beautiful things, the dramatic impermanence of snow is preferred. Death is no longer an enemy; she is embraced. The poet, like Camus' Sisyphus peering into the abyss of his fate, loves what crushes him:

> . . . All Sisyphus' silent joy is contained therein. His fate belongs to him. His rock is his thing. Likewise, the absurd man, when he contemplates his torment, silences all the idols. . . . There is no sun without shadow, and it is essential to know the night. The absurd man says yes and his effort will henceforth be unceasing. . . . At that subtle moment when man glances backward over his life, Sisyphus returning toward his rock, in that slight pivoting he contemplates that series of unrelated actions which becomes his fate. . . . Thus, convinced of the wholly human origin of all that is human, a blind man eager to see, who knows that the night has no end, he is still on to go. The rock is still rolling.[5]

The setting of "like Decorations in a Nigger Cemetery" is in the waning days of autumn. "Credences of Summer" is another meditation on the cycle of life and death, but its setting is in the heavy days of August:"One of the limits of reality/Presents itself. . . when the hay,/ Baked through long days, is piled in mows" (CP, 374). These lines from section IV focus on the mind's necessity to confront the death of summer.

For Wallace Stevens, "summer" is the supreme achievement of nature and of the creative act, yet in section II it is described as "the

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[5]Albert Camus, The Myth of Sisyphus and Other Essays, tr. by Justin O'Brien, Vintage Books (New York: Random House, Inc., 1955), p. 91.

barrenness/ Of the fertile thing that can attain no more" (CP, 373). Because it is complete, it offers no tension to the mind, even though it is "the natural tower of all the world,/ The point of survey, green's green apogee" (CP, 373). The meditator considers summer to be dead since it has achieved fruition. He imagines an old man looking on this scene, fully capable of accepting death:

> . . . Here the sun,
> Sleepless, inhales his proper air, and rests.
> This is the refuge that the end creates.
> It is the old man standing on the tower,
> Who reads no book. His ruddy ancientness
> Absorbs the ruddy summer and is appeased,
> By an understanding that fulfills his age,
> By a feeling capable of nothing more.
> CP, 373-374

The above lines from section III seem at first to eliminate the tension that follows in the poem beginning with section IV. What has happened, of course, is that the old man is no longer present in IV: He was merely an image in the poet's thoughts to represent how a certain mind could accept ripeness and death. But the speaker of the poem is young, and he must accommodate himself to winter. This is what "Credences" sets out to do.

In imagining the old man's acceptance of the passing of summer, then, Stevens introduces the duality between reason and emotion. The mind says yes to winter's necessity, but the heart says no. By September the imagination can not avoid facing the reality of summer's end.

Yet, at this moment of stark realization of emptiness, a new kind of life paradoxically springs phoenix-like, which the poem's beginning prepares for us:

> This is the last day of a certain year
> Beyond which there is nothing left of time.
> It comes to this and the imagination's life.
> CP, 372

The imagination transcends the "essential barrenness" which autumn predicts. The imagination creates the subjective "rock of summer" out of objective reality. "The rock cannot be broken. It is the truth" (CP, 375). The rock is a purposefully absurd conceit: It is sterile, yet the imagination can make it bloom. Anything is possible, the most marvelous of imaginative metamorphoses, once the rock is accepted:

> It is the rock of summer, the extreme,
> A mountain luminous half way in bloom
> And then half way in the extremest light
> Of sapphires flashing from the central sky,
> As if twelve princes sat before a king.
> CP, 375

Nevertheless, external reality, the coming of autumn, makes it "difficult to sing in face/ Of the object" (CP, 376). The imagination's need to accept the death of summer is juxtaposed with the physical

signs that summer has gone. Facing up to things as they are, Stevens becomes more certain; it is visible reality itself which justifies the imagination's refusal to accept the death of summer as final. Summer will in fact return, and the imagination will preserve our memory of it. Indeed, "summer's" coming is announced even before autumn has begun:

> The trumpet of morning blows in the clouds and through
> The sky. It is the visible announced,
> It is the more than visible, the more
> Than sharp, illustrious scene.
> CP, 376

Acceptance of the constant cycle of life and death as in "Credences of Summer" is pursued in "The Auroras of Autumn." "Auroras" is a meditation inspired by the aurora borealis. The aurora is a false dawn, a symbol of doubt produced by the sepent's guile: "This is his poison: that we should disbelieve/ Even that" (CP, 411), "that" meaning the promise of spring. Yet the reality of the sun 's flashing on the skin of the snake ironically proves the stability of beauty: beauty merely assumes new forms. For Stevens the snake embodies evil and beauty because Stevens philosophically accepts the imperfect: "The Imperfect is our paradise" (CP, 194). Each shifting of the sun's light, like the changing of the seasons, has its own beauty:

> . . . His meditations in the ferns,
> When he moved so slightly to make sure of the sun,
> Made us no less as sure. We saw in his head,
> Black beaded on the rock, the flecked animal,
> The moving grass, the Indian in his glade.
> CP, 411-412

The gorgeousness of nature is displayed in autumn just before bleak whiteness sets in. But whiteness also suggests purity or innocence. Thus, the previous section on winter (VII) precedes the one on innocence. (Melville's discussion in Moby Dick of the contradictory nature of whiteness is relevant here). The belief in "innocence," the state of Being, is a renewing of the Edenic musings in It Must Be Abstract. Since this belief is more tenuous in autumn, it almost becomes a desperate act of will:

> There may be always a time of innocence.
> There is never a place. Or if there is no time,
> If it is not a thing of time, nor a place,
>
> Existing in the idea of it, alone,
> In the sense against calamity, it is not
> Less real. . . .
>
> CP, 418

Stevens further examines the paradox in "The Plain Sense of Things." The description of the land wasted by autumn is not altogether pessimistic because the mind's perception of "this sadness without cause" (CP, 502) is only possible through the imagination's memory of the fertility of summer and that season's meaning to the beholder: "/T/he absence of the imagination had/ Itself to be imagined." (CP, 503) Thus, "The great pond and its waste of lilies" . . . depends on the paradoxical relationship of the things of nature, the external world, with the ego or the inner world. It is only by dint of the imagination that a sad response to the "waste of lilies" occurs. At the very fearful moment when it seems "as if/ We had come to an end of the imagination" (CP, 502),

we remember and experience a sense of the power of the imagination to create in time of dearth. It is not foolish dreaming because spring and summer will return. This is why man accepts what threatens to crush him. His imagination momentarily transcends the thought of death.

The seasonal settings of these last poems afford Stevens the opportunity to speculate on the sufficiency of external reality, i.e., nature, in time of ebb. In such a bare time he realizes the necessity for believing in the imagination in order to survive, but he also suffers the terrible doubt that his imagination will stagnate without the inspiration of nature's fertility. Then, remembering that the seasons flow into each other, that they are all necessary to each other, he learns to celebrate even the starkness of November: The wonder of spring and summer feed the imagination; since winter is necessary for spring and summer, it too deserves celebration.

Before we turn to some poems representative of Stevens' harmonius late vision of totality in the world, we will look at two abstract poems which underscore the necessity for and enjoyment of perceiving this world with a sense of humility.

"Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly" emphasizes the frailty of man's power to perceive with certainty. Stevens berates Mr. Homburg for rejecting the imagination. Mr. Homburg considers his belief in the things of the real world to be superior:

To think away the grass, the trees, the clouds,
Not to transform them into other things,
Is only what the sun does every day . . .
CP, 517

Mr. Homburg considers the spiritual world of the Concord transcendentalists, but he call it "a mechanical /And slightly detestable operandum (CP, 517). He adds condescendingly:

No doubt we live beyond ourselves in air,

In an element that does not do for us,
So well, that which we do for ourselves . . .
CP, 518

To Mr. Homburg the invisible world is "A/thing not planned for imagery or belief, / Not one of the masculine myths we used to make" (CP, 518). He despises too the imagined world because he does not find "What we know in what we see, what we feel in what / We hear, what we are, beyond mystic disputation" (CP, 518).

Stevens is describing a person who arrogantly assumes that the known world is superior to the imagined world and who, therefore, opts for the former. This person from Concord is sure that "The spirit comes from the body of the world, but Stevens comments, "Or so Mr. Homburg thought" (CP, 519). Stevens' interjection of doubt is a resounding one. While he can only perceive the natural world, i.e., "the body of the world," his humble sense of man's limitations tells him that the physical world man perceives is part of something larger, a vast unknown which we call the spirit. And even regarding man's supposedly known world, there are frighening truths: the

things that one sees at a particular time are for that time only. The world appears to be constantly changing, and all that the mind can do is attempt to reflect that change. Perhaps, however, it is only the mind that changes and objects that are permanent. Or, perhaps, the world and the mind both change. We can never be sure, since objectivity concerning the physical world is not possible. In either case, all that man can do is attempt to be a perceiver and preserver of the world he only thinks he inhabits.

"Looking Across the Fields and Watching the Birds Fly," then, demonstrates some important things about Stevens' thought: It shows that Stevens loves the things of this world, because they are the only things he can begin to know; but he is too aware of the limitations of human knowledge to doubt the necessity for believing in the world of the imagination which orders the tangible world. God may be dead for Stevens, but something must take His place. The fact that Stevens believes in this spirit, even if it is derided as "one of the masculine myths we used to make," only further shows that his existentialist sensibility desires to be optimistic rather than nihilistic.

This desire for a happy accommodation to man's mortal condition is demonstrated even in such as late poem as "July Mountain," written in 1955,[6] the last year of Stevens' life.

We live in a constellation
Of patches and of pitches,

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[6]For date see OP, 300.

Not in a single world,
. . . . . .
Thinkers without final thoughts . . .
OP, 114-115

The image that Stevens uses to depict this idea of human limitation is the shifting view that a mountain climber has in his climb to the summit. Is the final Vermont the view that we have from the mountain peak when it "throws itself together," or is the true Vermont the plot of ground we stand on in the valley below? Or is it some town we remember in our mind's eye, or a person we know? The wonderfully objective vision of Vermont from a pinnacle is not totally ideal. It is also very fuzzy from afar. Thus, each moment in our lives has some lovely as well as limiting advantages, reminding us that we are

Thinkers without final thoughts
In an always incipient cosmos . . .

When we turn to "St. John and the Back-Ache", we see Stevens again with the theme of the limits of human perception and understanding, which we saw in "Looking Across the Fields" and "July Mountain," and his concept of "incarnation" added to it. The mind struggles to probe the logic of good and evil, good and evil being merely symbols of the puzzling contradictoriness of reality as a whole, and the mind reaches a vision in which the two forces are seen coalescing.

Stevens first distinguishes between the presence of reality and the mind's attempt to understand that reality. Presence precedes

understanding: "Presence is not mind./. . ./ It fills the being before the mind can think"(CP, 436). Concerning these presences, Stevens states that

> They help us face the dumbfoundering abyss
> Between us and the object, external cause,
> The little ignorance that is everything. . .
> CP, 437

The pain or "venom of reality is also its wisdom . . .;"[7] therefore, the mind must not steel itself against reality, like the turtle in its shell, but openly accept what it can only know as apparent good and bad. This disenthralling of the ego is irrational, says the Back-Ache (the symbol of the poet's skepticism), but only with such trust, says Saint John (symbol of the poet's optimism) can there be even the possibility of mortal vision incarnating with human desire, when "the possible nest in the invisible tree/. . ./. . . may hold a serpent [some mind-shattering truth] . . ./. . .

> Whose venom and whose wisdom will be one.
> Then the stale turtle will grow limp from age.
> We shall be heavy with the knowledge of that day.
> CP, 437

Stevens' "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" is his most penetrating and beautiful meditation on this "incarnation" of reality with imagination in terms of the absurd. He initially states the sufficiency of physical reality in the face of some Platonic "giant" of

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[7]Ronald Sukenick, Wallace Stevens: Musing the Obscure; Readings and Interpretation and a Guide to the Collected Poetry. The Gotham Library (New York: New York University Press, 1967), p. 166.

imagination:

> The houses, these difficult objects, dilapidate
> Appearances of what appearances,
> Words, lines, not meanings, not communications . . .
> CP, 465

He rejects the ideal Platonic imagination, which represents a solipsistic world unrelated to the physical world, in favor of a "second giant," which, paradoxically, is "A recent imagining of reality" (CP, 465). In other words, external reality is in a war with pure imagination, which is the "fatal moon" (CP, 472). The imagination is fatal because unless it responds to reality directly and from moment to moment, it will bring the mind perilously close to the dangers of solipsism.

Just how much is included in "reality" for Stevens is clearly stated:

> . . . We seek
> Nothing beyond reality. Within it,
>
> Everything, the spirit's alchemicana
> Included the spirit that goes roundabout
> And through included, not merely the visible,
>
> The solid, but the moveable, the moment,
> The coming on of feasts and the habits of saints,
> The pattern of the heavens and high, night air.
> CP, 471-472

The visible and the "invisible" are both necessary to the composing of reality. Different metaphors for the tangible and intangible world are the "near" and the "distant", the day (sun) and the night (moon), respectively. The two are married to each other:

> The two romanzas, the distant and the near,
> Are a single voice in the boo-ha of the wind.
>
> . . . . . .
>
> The sun is half the world, half everything,
>
> . . . . . .
>
> If, then, New Haven is half sun, what remains,
>
> At evening, after dark, is the other half . . .
> CP, 481-482

Although reality is the base ("We keep coming back and coming back/ To the real," CP, 471), it is not all: "The plainness of plain things is savagery" (CP, 467). An incarnation of the imagined with the real, e.g. "desire," must occur: "The point of vision and desire are the same./ . . . / Say next to holiness is the will thereto,/ And next to love is the desire for love" (CP, 466-467). Just as "lewd spring comes from winter's chastity" (CP, 468), so reality and imagination, Alpha and Omega, form a circle:[8]

> Since both alike appoint themselves the choice
> Custodians of the glory of the scene,
> The immaculate interpreters of life.
> But that's the difference: in the end and the way
> To the end. Alpha continues to begin.
> Omega is refreshed at every end.
> CP, 469

The "incarnation" envisioned in "An Ordinary Evening" takes

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[8] Eliot has a similar image: "We shall not cease from exploration/ And the end of all our exploring/ Will be to arrive where we started/ And know the place for the first time." T.S. Eliot, The Complete Poems and Plays (New York: Harcourt, Brace and Company, Inc., 1952), p. 145.

place in winter when physical reality is most bare and the senses least stimulated by nature. The imagination's sense of what is possible can be seen "at once" then,because the lushness of summer's reality can not interfere with the minds' imaginings. The "Real and Unreal are two in one" (CP, 485) because the "unreal" spring is vividly anticipated as coming to life in the imagination's reality:

> The barrenness that appears is an exposing.
> It is not part of what is absent, a halt
> For farewells, a sad hanging on for remembrances.
>
> It is a coming on and a coming forth.
> CP, 487

One can summarize this passage and say that it points to the necessity to accept the present as the key to "possibleness"(CP, 481). All the processes of life are one. The mind is capable of experiencing through the imagination that which heretofore was considered only a possibility, an unreality: e.g., the promise of spring issuing from the barrenness of winter. When we understand this, we understand what Stevens means by the line, "Everything as unreal as real can be" (CP, 468).

Each of the thirty-one poems in "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" are variations on this theme. Each scene freshly celebrates the ambivalent nature of the world. The entire collection of scenes suggest that the poem in its constant state of transformation could be endless. Stevens demonstrates time and again that anything is a fit subject for a poem.

It is appropriate that Stevens, a man of the world and a poet of the imagination, should write one of his most sustained visions of "paradise" in his only political poem, Owl's Clover (1936).[9] Written in the Depression and early Nazi years, the poem attempts to analyze the sickness of the civilized world. The future is black: "High up in heaven a sprawling portent moves, / As if it bears all darkness in its bulk" (OP, 68). Like Yeats's slouching beast heralding some horrible new order, Stevens' portentous monster "Broods in tense meditation, constantly, / On the city, on which it leans, the people there . . . ." In this closing section called Sombre Figuration Stevens envisions the idea of mob violence:

> It is the form
> Of a generation that does not know itself,
> Still questioning if to crush the soaring stacks,
> The churches, like dalmatics stooped in prayer,
> And the people suddenly evil, waked, accused,
> Destroyed by a vengeful movement of the arms,
> A mass overtaken by the blackest sky,
> Each one as part of the total wrath, obscure
> In slaughter. . . .
>
> OP, 68-69

This has the helpless despair of some of Auden's sonnets a few years later where he morbidly notes, "And maps can really point to places/ Where life is evil now:/ Nanking; Dachau."[10]

It is ironic that in confronting the spiritual dearth of his age

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[9] For date see Letters, 257.

[10] "In Time of War," The Collected Poetry of W. H. Auden (New York: Random House, Inc., 1945), Sonnet XVI, 12-14.

Stevens writes one of his most passionate lyrics recollecting the spiritual health of past ages. Like T.S. Eliot in Four Quartets, Stevens recalls Dante, but Eliot, as in this passage from "Little Gidding," is explicitly Dantesque:

> And all shall be well and
> All manner of things shall be well
> When the tongues of flame are in-folded
> Into the crowned knot of fire
> And the fire and the rose are one.[11]

Stevens, however, frames his envy of the mediaeval world in existential terms. The following passage is from section III of The Greenest Continent in Owl's Clover:

> There was a heaven once. . .
> . . . It was
> The spirit's episcopate, hallowed and high,
> To which the spirit ascended, to increase
> Itself, beyond the utmost increase come
> From youngest day or oldest night and far
> Beyond thought's regulation. There each man,
> Through long cloud-cloister porches, walked alone,
> Noble within perfecting solitude,
> Like a solitude of the sun, in which the mind
> Acquired transparence and beheld itself
> And beheld the source from which transparence came;
> And there he heard the voices that were once
> The confusion of men's voices, intricate
> Made extricate by meanings, meanings made
> Into a music never touched to sound.
> There, too, he saw, since he must see, the domes
> Of azure round an upper dome, brightest
> Because it rose above them all, stippled
> By waverings of stars, the joy of day
> And its immaculate fire, the middle dome,
> The temple of the altar where each man
> Beheld the truth and knew it to be true.
> OP, 53-54

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[11] Eliot, p. 145.

Stevens in his later, purely meditative "An Ordinary Evening in New Haven" recognizes that man cannot know "Truth." He seesthe world of metaphor (the world of "as") and the world of appearance (the world of "is") coalescing:

> The instinct for heaven had its counterpart:
> The instinct for earth, for New Haven,
> for his room,
> The gay tournamonde as of a single world
>
> In which he is and as and is are one.
> CP, 476

The glorious and final harmony, then, dwells in the simple discovery that a true poet's and a man's strength lies, as Professor Eucalyptus says, in "the self/ Of his self" (CP, 475).

The lyrical base of Stevens' poetry, that which explains how he can be optimistic, is ultimately an expression of faith: faith in the assumption that objective reality (reality unperceived by the eye) is unknowable and therefore must be transformed to a beautiful "unreal." It is this faith in the seen as base that provides Stevens with his delight in the use of the imagination as interpreter of or better creator of man's existence.

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